

PROFILES

Reflections on the Historicity of Democracy in the Arab and Muslim Worlds: HISDEMAB, international and collaborative research project (2020–2023)

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Contemporary debates on democracy in the Arab and Muslim worlds are dominated by bitter impressions following the return to authoritarian regimes after the short parenthesis of what mainstream media have often labelled as the "Arab Spring". After a few months or years of enthusiasm, considerations have now been raised again about the alleged incompatibility of democracy with societies of the broader region. HISDEMAB, as a collaborative and international research network, moves beyond this dichotomy. It investigates what the historicity of democracy and deliberative practices in the societies of the region has been and what it is today and critically discusses the various layers of culturalist reifications that have accumulated. The aim is to explore this crucial issue by examining the forms of political organization



Archives nationales de Tunisie. Photo: Nora Lafi

that were inherent in societies of the region. The project discusses their impact on various forms of modernity, including late Ottoman, colonial, and national, in challenging Eurocentric interpretations. It is also to propose a critical examination of this heritage and its historical evolution between the accommodation of circulating forms, the negation of local existing forms, the dilution of local governance schemes, and ambiguous resurgences of old forms under

the lens of ideologically oriented solutions. The forms of collective deliberation that are relevant in a discussion of inherent, possibly early democratic impulses include numerous councils and assemblies at various scales, from villages and cities to provinces, and deliberative institutions in the world of guilds and in confessional communities.

The project seeks to establish an innovative research network that connects three institutes of the Leb-

niz Association (the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin – ZMO, the Leibniz-Institut für Europäische Geschichte in Mainz – IEG, and the Leibniz-Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung in Potsdam – ZZf) with two research institutions in the Arab world (the Institut français du Proche-Orient – IFPO – in Amman,

discussion, HISDEMAB challenges existing interpretations of the ontology of democracy and its relationship to societies of the Middle East and North Africa.

While the team based at ZMO explores democracy and discourses on democracy in three phases of the Ottoman Empire (early modern, 19th

times, the project aims at following the actors, vocabulary, mechanisms, and processes of these interactions and at interpreting them as possible proto-democratic elements that interacted with external impulses in various times. HISDEMAB counts five doctoral fellows: Abdel Qader Amer (IFPO/Jordan University) studies the impact between British colonial authorities and pre-existing forms of organized civic life in Baghdad between 1914 and 1932, focusing particularly on voting procedures in the various councils of the government. Ahlem Hajaji (Manouba University) dedicates her research to communal Jewish deliberative and voting practices in colonial Tunis. With a specific focus on women, she studies the archives of communal institutions, as well as the interaction between this sphere and that of the colonial authorities. As for present-day practices in a post-revolutionary context, she conducts interviews with women of the Jewish community of Tunis. Elisabeth Kimmerle (ZZf Potsdam) works on the civic sociability of female migrants from Turkey in West Germany (1961–1990), with a focus on the local renegotiation of transnational networks regarding notions like democracy, equality, and civil rights. Marianne Dhenin (IEG) focuses her research on the construction of gendered urban spaces in colonial and formally independent (post-1922) Cairo and particularly on aspects of citizenship and participation. Also about Cairo, Robin Schmahl (ZMO) investigates the deliberation and voting system in the diwan (council) before and during the period of French occupation, insisting on the precise way decisions were made and negotiations were conducted.

The programme also features senior fellows working in their respective research centres on diverse aspects of the historicity of democracy: Manfred Sing (IEG) studies local debates on citizenship after 1922 when Egypt became formally independent; Habib Kazdaghli (Manouba University) dedicates his research for the programme to the question of confessional communities in colonial Tunisia and to that of present-day



Archives nationales de Tunisie. Photo: Ahlem Hajaji

Jordan, and Manouba University in Tunis, Tunisia), while also including guest researchers from the wider Arab and Muslim worlds. The project is funded by the Leibniz Collaborative Excellence programme.

In more detail HISDEMAB explores democracy and debates about democracy from a historical perspective. The objective of the programme is to track early forms of civic expression and interpret them in their context. The work within the network starts from the sources (archival records, chronicles, treaties, memoirs) and investigates diverse forms of deliberation, decision-making processes, and mechanisms of representation, participation, and voting in local societies from the past, confronting this sphere with the question of democracy and its regimes of historicity, i. e. interaction between various temporalities and successive redefinitions. The intention is to follow the evolution, transformation, suppression, reinterpretation, instrumentalization, and/or revival of such forms throughout history, from medieval times to the Ottoman era, colonization, and decolonization. Far from reifying these features and seeing them as civilizational constants or mystifying their relevance, the idea is to assess how they interacted with complex times and power systems. In proposing a historically informed

century, and early 20th century), the ZZf-based team investigates the Turkish case in the post-Atatürk era from a historical perspective and the IEG investigates the relationship between democracy and Islam in theoretical discourses and political practices in the 19th- and 20th-century Arab world and particularly in Egypt. Partners at IFPO Amman focus on the case study of the Municipality of Jerusalem during the British Mandate and on the legacy of Ottoman deliberative institutions and their interpretation in the 20th century, as well as on the historicity of democracy in Iraq. Meanwhile, the project partners at Manouba University (the Laboratoire Régions et Ressources Patrimoniales de Tunisie) work on an analysis of communal deliberative and voting practices on the scale of confessional communities in Ottoman and colonial times, as well as on questions of contemporary interpretations of the notion of democracy and of its history.

By proposing a more complex social horizon and by implementing research that focuses on the details of practices of deliberation, negotiation, and voting, the project aims at avoiding generalizations. Its spirit is to track daily interactions that denote a practice of participation, debate, negotiated decision, or appointment. Working on both concepts and prac-



From left to right: Ahlem Hajaji, Abdel Qader Amer, Robin Schmahl, Elisabeth Kimmerle. Photos: private

references to the history of democracy in Tunisia in a post-revolutionary context; Frank Bösch (ZZF) works on transnational political networks, as well as on the notion of authoritarianism; Falestin Naili (IFPO) focuses on the Municipality of Jerusalem during the period of British colonization and specifically on questions of voting, census suffrage, and deliberation; while Nora Lafi's research (ZMO) is on local assemblies in Algeria, Syria, and Libya in Ottoman times and specifically on both the nature of local deliberative institutions and their reinterpretation in a colonial context. Maija Susarina serves as project coordinator (replaced temporarily during 2021 and 2022 by Rand El-Zein

and Sophie Wilske) and Simon Bauman as student assistant.

After one year of intense online research socialization and the first round of field researches, the first in-person meeting of the members of the network took place in Berlin in November 2021. International workshops will take place in 2022

and 2023 in Amman, Tunis, and Berlin. The HISDEMAB online bi-weekly public seminar started in November 2020. Its first academic year regularly gathered more than 200 attendees. The second series is starting 13 December 2021. For more information see also <https://hisdemab.hypotheses.org/about>.



Teamwork under varying conditions. Photos: HISDEMAB