The Middle East in the Contemporary World

Graduate Student Conference 2019 | Centre for Middle Eastern Studies

Conference Programme

May 16th
Room 129, Eden Building
Paradisgatan 5
Introduction

The Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) is pleased to welcome guests and panellists to this year's Graduate Student Conference, entitled "The Middle East in the Contemporary World". The conference is intended as an opportunity for students at CMES and more widely at Lund University to present and discuss their own research and ideas relating to the Middle East. We hope that you will find the presentations stimulating and engaging.

The Middle East in the Contemporary World (MECW) is a multi- and transdisciplinary strategic research area running since 2009, funded by the Swedish Research Council and hosted and supported by CMES at Lund University. It brings together national and international expertise on Middle Eastern societies, looking beyond the “Middle East” as a geopolitical region. MECW explores the “Middle East” as a fluid and transregional concept, focusing on processes, flows, mobilities, power relationships, and debates.
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Research Abstracts

Muslim-Jewish relations in Maghreb: Examining a surviving heritage of societal co-existence in contemporary Morocco

Munshi Zubaer Haque – Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES)

The Moroccan Jewish community has a rich history in the Maghreb, a history that spans over two millennia. The Moroccan Jewish population, despite various waves of religiously motivated immigration to Israel from Morocco, has continued to live side by side along with fellow Moroccan Muslim brethren and today Morocco has the 2nd largest Jewish population among countries in the ‘Muslim’ world, with approximate 6000 inhabitants, second only to Iran and the largest Jewish population in Maghrib. Despite a successful story of coexistence between Muslims and Jews, the Jewish population in Morocco continues to decline and the reasons behind this decline shall be identified. Although Morocco has not witnessed violent demonstrations with the onset of ‘Arab Spring’, it has been a defining feature of socio-political upheaval in contemporary Arab world and ascertaining the fate of Moroccan Jewish population during these winds of political change is crucial. The legitimacy of the present Moroccan monarchy is accepted by Muslims and Jews alike and the Jewish community also maintains cordial relations with non-Arab Amazigh or Berber minority in Morocco. Interestingly, although, Morocco has no official normalization of ties with Israel, Jewish emigration to Israel is permissible and there are extensive people to people relations through tourism between these two countries. Contextualizing the past and present of Moroccan Jewish population within its social-cultural milieu of coexistence is the central theme of this study and shall be based on both historical and contemporary studies.

Keywords: Morocco, Islam, Judaism, Muslims, Jews

The Hurdles of the Patriarchy – Women and Politics in Lebanon

Julia van Zijl – Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES)

Women in political positions and democratic transitions is a greatly under-researched topic within the context of the Middle East. Although Lebanon was one of the first countries in the Arab region to establish equal rights for men and women to fully participate in politics, only 17 women served in the Lebanese parliament since 1952. This research approaches the concept of gender as a multidimensional concept, influencing the position of women in politics through different communal structures. It thereby asks the question, how does the patriarchal structure, sectarianism and neopatrimonialism hinder female political participation in Lebanon? Political participation thereby refers to the ways citizens’ actions influence politics.

The research is constructed around a qualitative case-study and uses semi-structured interviews as its main source of information. Between fifteen and twenty interviews with women from various backgrounds who are activist promoting female political participation through involvement with civil society or politics. Most of the contacts will be acquired with the help of the non-profit organisation ABAAD MENA. The research expects that the three concepts form interdimensional obstacles for women and need to be targeted not only through an institutional change, but also a change in mentality from society.

Keywords: Gender, politics, patriarchy, democracy, Lebanon
The Women of the enlightenment: Tunisia’s new generation of female Islamist politicians in the Ennahda party

Margaret Odone – Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES)

Following Tunisia’s transformation in 2011 from a long time dictatorship to a new democracy, the Ennahda party was the second most popular party in the country’s first fair election. Within the Ennahda party, an Islamist party, inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, were a number of female candidates. Using theory from Saba Mahmood, laid out in her book Politics of Piety, this thesis will explore the beliefs of women in Tunisia’s Ennahda Party, and how these fit with the assumptions of feminist theory and secular liberal politics.

Keywords: Tunisia, Islamic feminism, democratic transition

Personal Status Laws and Non-Sectarianism in Lebanon

Matthew Heinrichs – Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES)

This presentation will explore recent developments in personal status laws and non-sectarian political affiliation in Lebanon. While the Lebanese sectarian elite has a stranglehold on personal status laws, their grip seems to be weakening. In November 2012, the first civil marriage was performed in Lebanon, followed by the first baby to be born outside of the sectarian system (Abillama 2018). Furthermore, non-sectarian political movements including Beirut Madinati and Sabaa are challenging the sectarian divisions that force Lebanese citizens to rely on sectarian affiliation for many basic administrative services. In many ways, the existence of these parties is tied to frustrations with the entrenched sectarian elites, who are accused of massive levels of corruption and inefficiency in governance. Non-sectarian parties are becoming an alternative for these frustrated voters, but they remain to this day powerless in the government. However, my presentation will show that they are a highly probable future for Lebanese governance and merit further study, especially on their policies on personal status laws. Using results from the World Values Survey and party websites, this presentation will focus on the recent challenges to sectarian divisions in the government and society at large.

Keywords: Non-Sectarianism, Politics, Lebanon, Opposition, Identity

The Bisri Dam - issues of water in Lebanon

Rebekka Storm Rubin – Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES)

The World Bank and the Lebanese government plan to build a dam in the Bisri Valley to supply Greater Beirut and Mount Lebanon with water. While the project aims to address the severe water shortages in these governorates, it impacts the local communities in the Bisri Valley. The local inhabitants, of whom a great number are farmers, face resettlement due to the construction of the dam. Moreover, the project may have negative impact on the natural habitats and forests of the valley. The valley is also home to various archaeological sites that face destruction due to the dam. Another crucial critique of the project is the fact that the dam is to be built on top of a seismic fault line, implying that the valley is prone to experience earthquakes.

The project is meeting resistance from local communities and the Lebanon Eco Movement. These actors claim that there hasn’t been a sufficient Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA). The World Bank has rejected an ESIA, claiming that there has already been a thorough investigation of potential impact. Moreover, there has been made a petition against the Bisri Dam currently counting
around 30,000 signatures, and protests have been carried out to show opposition to the construction of the dam.

I consider applying one or more of the following approaches. I may investigate the case of the Bisri Dam by looking at the interconnection between environmental and social justice. Another perspective is that of activism and social movements, focusing on the resistance against the Bisri Dam. Another theme is human rights, and how the construction of the dam may violate the human rights of the local communities. A broader theme of the research may be a critical perspective on the course of development and development-induced environmental and social consequences.

*Keywords:* Development, sustainability, water resources, activism, justice

**Nature Schools vs. Conventional Schools in Iran: Exploring the transformative potentials of Nature Schools in current dominant educational regime through the lens of Multi-level Perspective theory**

*Fateme Bashiri – Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies (LUCSUS)*

Iranian educational system has gone through extreme reforms in the past decades, over the course of ‘cultural revolution’ and according to the Islamic values. Ever since the educational contents in schools and even higher educations has been exposed to high political sensitivity. However, in the winter of 2015 the first nature school was established in Iran. These schools were founded by a group of civil society actors and environmentalists with the vision to reconnect the modern child back to nature. At the moment, there are more than 50 nature schools running in different regions of Iran. Their main objective is to enhance the multi-dimensional development of the children and one of the byproducts of this experience will be a generation of children that are more environmentally conscious, and their behaviors are less harmful towards nature. Nature schools can be considered as social innovations due to the entirely innovative and transformative nature of their concepts and methods. However, these schools face many constraints such as funding, legal recognition, and suffer from many conflicts with the government and the ministry of education such as suspension or complete close down. Nevertheless, the Nature Schools are gradually gaining more supporters and members despite the above-mentioned tensions and constraints. Having that said, there are still many who refuse to register their children in these schools due to various reasonings. Some supporters and managers claim that the Nature Schools make children needless of attending the conventional schools. This study aims to explore this claim (possibility) through Multi Level Perspective Theory. Considering each Nature school as a single niche in the current dominant educational regime, I will explore the potential of these niches to change the dominant regime. Concurrently the elements in the landscape that reinforce or constrain the process of transformation will be investigated.

*Keywords:* Nature Schools, Iran, Multi-level Perspective, environment, sustainability

**The Colour of Integration**

*Sofie Jørgensen – Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES)*

A qualitative case study on the Imam Ali Mosque from 2015, in Copenhagen. Looking at the mosque as a visual representation of integration in Denmark. Answering the question: How was the Imam Ali Mosque being established? And how do internal and external actors perceive the mosques architecture?

In Denmark mosques are central in the debate on integration and Muslims. Historically the mosques in Denmark have been more or less invisible to be public (Külhe and Larsen, p. 9). The change into a visible architecture arguably represents a new phase in integration, claiming not only an inner territory
but also an outer territory. It is a symbol of the power struggles and pragmatic negotiations internally and externally. This study includes focus on internal and external, local and global factors. On a practical level the mosque is a complex mix between local and global trends and connections. With its blue tiles, domes and minarets, well known in the Middle Eastern region, it stands out in the architectural landscape in Denmark (Külhe and Larsen, p. 71). In this way it’s a new and physical re-imagination of the architectural landscape. The colourful and decorative style is a global trend for Shia mosques. The Imam Ali mosque has clear similarities to the Jamkaran Mosque in Qom, Iran. The connection to Iran is further underlined with the Ahl-ul Bayt organisation as one of the organisations behind the mosque. Ahl-ul Bayt is a global Shiite organisation with headquarter in Tehran. The architecture and establishment therefore reflect the mosques transnational identity. In Denmark very little have been written about mosques in Denmark, and even less about Shia mosques in Denmark. It is however relevant to understand the changing character and representation of the mosques in Denmark.

Keywords: Mosques, transnationalism, visual representation, Shia Islam, Denmark

Put that in your ethnography - a study of queer British Muslims

Anna Holmqvist – Centre of Theology and Religious Studies (CTR)

Unsurprisingly, Muslim groups rejecting the idea of Islam and LGBTQIA+ as being non-amicable, have developed. A year ago, I came across one of these groups in the UK (hereby referred to as The Muslim Queer Network (MQN)). Currently, I am conducting fieldwork centered on the MQN as a part of my master thesis in Islamology at Lund University, Sweden. The MQN initially formed in 2017 as an initiative among queer, Muslim friends who felt a need for a safe place to practice Islam together since they felt out of place in both queer and Muslim communities. This means they are still in an establishing organizational face, making ideas highly recyclable. As of now, the networks have two main activities: It conducts bi-weekly ijtihad sessions on various subjects; and it performs a bi-weekly zikir ceremony. The ijtihad sessions consist of open discussions around set topics, attempting to develop well-founded queer accepting Islamic ethics and theology. The zikir ceremony draws inspiration from Bektashism and has received authorization from a Bektashi baba in Istanbul, which allows them to perform zikir together as an official Sufi group. Further, the network also has an outspoken social and political engagement through social media and participation in various conferences and round-table talk. My presentation of MQN will focus on how a Muslim LGBTQIA+ group has stopped trying to ethically justify their – previously seen as – opposed identities. Instead the people active in the MQN are negotiating queer identities as a natural part of their lives, themselves and their religion. The study is based on fieldwork including participant observation and interviews, as well as having accompanied the group on a trip to Istanbul where they met the baba who authorized their zikir group. The study focuses on how the group’s collective identity is constructed through the different aspects of the group being mentioned earlier.

Keywords: Islam, LGBTQIA+, Sufism, ijtihad, United Kingdom

Qahera: Religion, gender politics and webcomics

Ared Garcia – Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES)

A veiled woman flying over the streets of Cairo with super hearing powers, fighting sexual harassment and defying the social, religious and political norms is found in Qahera, the webcomic not the city. The creator behind this character is Egyptian graphic designer Deena Mohamed, her work is a central example to study a new trend among the Muslim and Arab populations of female empowerment and social critique using online platforms. However, webcomics as a rich field of visual communication and arts in the Middle East and North Africa region are still unexplored in academia. Therefore, I will
present a discussion concerning the social, political and aesthetic elements of Qahera’s webcomics. First, I examined diverse topics in the webcomics through the lenses of objectification of Islam and gender. This unique comic represents an opportunity to create female Muslim characters with a strong agency without rejecting an Islamic identity. Second, I will talk about the relation of Mohamed’s work and the challenges concerning the representation of Muslim populations and globalization effects. Research about female graphic designers and characters that offer a critical view of their reality is needed to understand and challenge politics, religion, and gender from a visual perspective in the MENA region.

Keywords: Webcomics, Islam, gender, objectification, globalization

Influence of religious rituals on sense of identity – case study of Hajjis in Malmo

Zane Liepinlauska – Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES)

Leading international research organizations argue that the Muslim population in Sweden is constantly growing. As a result of that, Muslims and the question of integration have become one of the central themes within the Swedish popular debate, where Islam tends to be discussed as something radically different to ‘Swedish values’ and incompatible with ‘Swedish ways of life’. This creates a notion of Islam being an obstacle to Muslim immigrant integration into the secular Swedish society, an argument especially widely used by the right-wing populist in Sweden and other European countries. My research seeks to investigate this ‘popular notion’ through looking at the Hajj, one of the main Islamic religious rituals – the mandatory pilgrimage to Mecca. It asks how the Hajj experience has influenced sense of belonging and identity among Hajji Muslims in Sweden. This will be achieved through conducting semi-structured interviews.

Whilst a lot of research has been done on integration patterns and strategies and identity formation processes of Muslim migrants living in the Christian heritage (especially the European) contexts, there is a visible lack of studies that focus on Islamic religious rituals and seek to explore the weight that those religious rituals carry in the processes of identity and belonging negotiation with the Muslim minority contexts. Therefore, my research seeks to address this knowledge gap and indicate the usefulness of interdisciplinary approach to research on identity and integration in Sweden and beyond.

Keywords: Religion, Rituals, Identity, Belonging, Migrants

Representation of minority problems in novels

Semih Tekin – Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES)

This paper sets out to provide an analysis of minorities issues as a topic of novels. With another expression, the Novels focus on the minorities problems will be taken into consideration. The Kurds and Hazaras will be the subject. The novels to be addressed are Kite Runner, by Halit Hüseyni, and Har, by Murat Uyurkulak. So, the question is what role do novels play in terms of minorities? My main focus will not be the history of these issues, but I want to use history as a tool to illustrate the problems. While my research proposal will reflect the historical dimension of the situation in general, it will draw attention to how the subject is also handled in Murat Uyurkulak's novel Har and Halit’s novel Kite Runner. There is a rich literature in the context of the evaluation of the minorities issues in the theoretical framework. However, theoretical perspectives will be conveyed by the approach in the novels and the objections and contributions brought to this approach. Therefore, I believe that my research will shed light on new approaches in academic researches.
I am planning to do interviews. The author(s) may be the first and best options. To know to what extent the author is aware of his own position and effect. Also, field work might be more sufficient, but I am not sure going to Afghanistan is a good idea. But also my intention is generally supported the document analysis.

“The writer, who describes an issue that is important for the last twenty years, by resembling a fireplace, proves that literature is not irrelevant to the experienced realities” (Şağır, 2016, p.1)

Keywords: Minority, Kurds, Hazaras, Novel
About CMES

The Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) was founded in 2007 to support, coordinate and expand research at Lund University (LU) on the Middle East. These efforts encourage and produce research with a more innovative, critical, and multidisciplinary approach towards Middle Eastern studies. Each semester we host public events, including talks, lectures, and seminars, providing a platform for discussion of the issues affecting the contemporary Middle East. We invite renowned scholars from around the world to discuss their research, as well as encouraging our own researchers to present their work.

For more information visit our website at https://www.cmes.lu.se/ or come to see us at our house at Finngatan 16, 223 62, Lund.