Navigating the Future

Religious Tourism in Saudi Arabia | Palestinian Social Media | Interview with Karim Kawar | Male Infertility in Lebanon
MISSION STATEMENT

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Welcome to the Winter 2020 edition of Al Noor, Boston College’s undergraduate-run Middle Eastern Studies journal. With every issue we publish, our goal is to direct our readers’ attention to topics that may not receive adequate focus in other media, and this issue is no different. For this issue, our first of the new decade, we chose to orient our focus towards the future. Every one of the pieces we present to you here provides a perspective on how the Middle East is confronting the issues of the future, from technological development to generational reproductive health. Our authors and editors have put a vast amount of time and effort into crafting this diverse range of pieces, and we hope that every reader comes away from Navigating the Future with new dimensions added to their understanding of the Middle East.

We begin with “Religious Tourism in Saudi Arabia: The Commercialization of the Hajj to Mecca,” in which Sydney Howard explores the consequences of the Saudi Arabian government’s increased focus on development in Mecca. The rapid development of the city continues to spark debate between the Saudi government, religious scholars, archaeologists, historians, and residents of Mecca, and Howard’s article provides an excellent perspective on this issue.

Next, we have “Facebook Walls and Separation Barriers: Palestinian Solidarity, Israeli Intervention, and the Construction of an Online Geography” by Josh Kadish. This paper examines how Palestinians leverage digital media to assert their national identity despite their marginalized status and fragmented geographical situation. Kadish provides a compelling account of the importance of media to Palestinian identity that has important implications for other marginalized communities elsewhere.

Our penultimate piece is an interview with Karim Kawar, the former ambassador from Jordan to the United States and one of the leading figures in Jordan’s IT sector, as well as the founder of Al Noor during his undergraduate years at Boston College. In the interview, Ambassador Kawar narrates his collaboration with the Jordanian government on the country’s IT development as well as his work as Ambassador to the U.S., and provides insight into how his own IT background led to his prolific and successful career.

Finally, we end with Donya Zarrinnegar’s statistics-driven review of masculinity and reproductive health in Lebanon: “Drought of Manhood: Normalizing Male Infertility in Lebanon.” Zarrinnegar brings together sociological and medical research to weave an account of the causes and social effects of male infertility, including a focus on the effects of the Lebanese Civil War on men’s reproductive health. She concludes with a nuanced discussion regarding the social repercussions of high rates of male infertility among Lebanon’s diverse population. As Zarrinnegar points out, infertility affects tens of millions of individuals worldwide, so the issues she introduces in this article have profound relevance throughout the rest of the Middle East and the world.

In addition to the issue you hold in your hands, we invite you to explore our website, bcalnoor.org, where we have archived our past issues for your reference.

As Editor-in-Chief, I must express my gratitude to all those who make Al Noor possible. Without our authors, editing staff, Boston College faculty support, and generous funders, this journal would not be able to function. Finally, all of us at Al Noor thank you, our readers, for your interest and continued support. Enjoy the issue!

William Pyle ’20
Editor-in-chief
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Religious Tourism in Saudi Arabia
AND THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE HAJJ TO MECCA

Sydney Howard
Sydney is a rising junior in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania. She is pursuing a BA in Economic History in addition to minors in Modern Middle Eastern Studies and Urban Real Estate & Development. After graduation, Sydney hopes to combine her interests by working on commercial real estate developments in emerging markets in the MENA region.
On August 18, 2018, more than 2 million Muslims embarked on their journey towards the holy city of Mecca. These 2 million travelers represent less than 0.0001% of the 1.5 billion Muslims around the world.¹ The hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam, entails a mandatory religious pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudia Arabia for all Muslims who are physically and financially able. This passage marks the second largest annual gathering of Muslims in the world behind the Arba’een Pilgrimage to Iraq, which commemorates the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson.² The Arabic word "hajj" directly translates to "to attend a journey," which is meant to reflect both the physical journey and the emotional intentions that motivate travelers. The journey aims to affirm the place of Muslims on earth by reminding them that all adherents to Islam are equal in the eyes of God, and to eliminate all symbols of status and wealth. Islamic travel continues to have important religious connotations for Muslims who embark on these...
expeditions to holy sites in an effort to become closer to God, which, for many Muslims, starts with the hajj.

What is intended to be a sacred experience for Muslims of all kinds, however, has devolved into a largely commercialized religious tourism business at the behest of the Saudi government. Ironically, Saudi government officials have historically refused to characterize the hajj as a form of religious tourism, so as not to associate this holy experience with the profligate behavior of Western tourists.\textsuperscript{3} Still, travel and tourism investment in Saudi Arabia in 2017 totaled more than 24.2 billion US dollars, which accounted for more than 10% of the country’s GDP.\textsuperscript{4} Even more astounding, the hajj and Umrah\textsuperscript{5} pilgrimages alone generate an estimated 12 billion US dollars per year.\textsuperscript{6} To put this in perspective, the pilgrimage industry has become Saudi Arabia’s second largest contributor to its GDP behind petroleum exports.\textsuperscript{7} These figures tell a very different story of religious tourism in Saudi Arabia than the one that government officials have narrated to the international community - a story that can be corroborated by the initiatives of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman over the past several years. In an effort to expand Saudi tourism, the Crown Prince has made visas more widely accessible, started several new luxury development projects, and spearheaded an expansion of urban centers that will redefine luxury and religious tourism in the state.

In this paper, I will highlight the effects that commercialization has had on the traditional principles of the hajj, and I will argue that, subsequently, the religious standards central to the hajj have been diluted over the past decade. I will start with a close examination of the earliest standards for the hajj and discuss the religious significance behind these standards. I will then assess the ways in which the modern hajj has deviated from its original framework and consider the possible reasons behind these changes. Lastly, I will use existing hajj tourism resources to highlight the commercialization and “Westernization” of this religious journey. In this context, the term “Westernization” refers to the increasingly extravagant trajectory of luxury tourism in Western countries. I will argue that the sheer number of holy sites in Saudi Arabia has prompted a growing pressure from the West to meet expectations for affluent travelers that frequently contradict the ideals of the hajj itself. Within my research, I will look at historical and social academic sources in addition to popular online travel agencies that market pilgrimage packages. By the end of this exploration, I hope to demonstrate how the rise of a luxury religious tourism industry is paving the way for a new and controversial modernization of the hajj.

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM**

Religious tourism is broadly defined as any “travel for religious purposes to visit holy centers, places, or events,” a phenomenon which experts trace back to prehistoric ages.\textsuperscript{8} In ancient Asia, Egypt, and Judea, for example, travelers of all kinds embarked on pilgrimages to visit the famous temples and oracles retained by each locale. Interestingly, historians believe that the most prosperous years for pilgrimage took place in Europe and the Mediterranean world between the fourth and sixteenth centuries CE within Christian societies.\textsuperscript{9} Throughout history, religious tourism has remained a core economic pillar of the communities that house sacred sites. In her paper “Pilgrims and Profits,” Feinberg Vamosh effectively sums up this relationship: “Throughout history, Christian pilgrimage has been a growth industry in the Holy Land. From relic-vendors to restaurateurs, from royal coffers to the Church itself, many have gained from the travel of the pious.”\textsuperscript{10}

The inherent economic and religious value in pilgrimages has inspired an independent component of contemporary travel in which the distinction between “pilgrim” and “tourist” are often blurred. The term “religious tourism” can generally be misleading, as tourists typically travel for pleasure and then return to their point of origin, while a pilgrim travels on a religious quest.\textsuperscript{11} Anthropologist Colin Turnbull describes pilgrims as travelers seeking to gain greater religious or spiritual belonging, while the tourist travels for more materialistic

“The religious standards central to the hajj have been diluted over the past decade.”
and hedonistic purposes. This differentiation becomes slightly ambiguous, as a tourist who travels to Israel may visit holy sites without considering their experience a pilgrimage of any kind. Today, there are more than 50,000 religious organizations worldwide that organize pilgrimages. In fact, some argue that the growing popularity of travel agencies has incited a new popularity of pilgrimages because travelers prefer to purchase inclusive package tours to individual exploration. Further blurring the divide between tourists and pilgrims, pilgrimage package tours have motivated a population of Muslims to embark on the hajj who otherwise would not have gone.

For Saudi Arabia specifically, religious tourism has remained a key component of the nation’s economy and its international status. The Saudi government’s commitment to Islamic ideals is reflected in the first objective of the Eighth Development Plan for the economy which aims to: “safeguard Islamic teachings and values, enhance national unity, security and social stability, and to firmly establish the Arab and Islamic identity of the Kingdom.” Islamic traditions trace the origins of the hajj back to 2000 BC and the story of Ibrahim, who left his wife and son alone in the desert under the orders of God and then built a shrine in remembrance when they survived. This shrine is what Muslims refer to today as the Kaaba, which is located at the heart of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and functions as the centerpiece of the modern hajj. The story of Ibrahim establishes a set of rituals meant to commemorate his surrender to God. Like Ibrahim, pilgrims don plain robes to enter a state of equality before Allah - a space in which non-Muslim spectators are prohibited. Because of the nation’s religious significance, Saudi Arabia has traditionally been reluctant to admit “leisure” tourists from outside the Muslim world for fear of un-Islamic influences. This conviction has been completely overturned by Crown Prince Salman’s Vision 2030 economic diversification strategy, under which the Saudi government plans to make leisure tourism visas accessible, lessen strict rules regarding female dress and alcohol consumption, and grow the number of hajj and Umrah tourists from 19 million per year to 30 million per year by 2030.

Mohammad bin Salman outlines the three “pillars” of his plan for Saudi Arabia: first to be the “heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds,” second to become a “global investment powerhouse,” and third to “transform [their] unique location into a global hub connecting…Asia, Europe, and Africa.” These three pillars have religious implications clearly making reference to the five pillars of Islam. By creating this subtle association, the Vision 2030 seems to give development initiatives that were previously dejected by Saudi officials a newfound religious drive. For tourism in particular, the prince promises to “create attractions…of the highest international standards, improve visa issuance procedures…, and prepare and develop…historical and heritage sites” by establishing more museums, preparing new historical sites and venues, improving the pilgrimage experience, and developing large coastal areas.

Ibrahim Al Rashid, the chairman of the tourism committee at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry, explains that “tourism is one of the focal points of the government’s strategy to strengthen the economy and reduce dependence on oil revenue.” In a 2016 report by the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), oil receipts accounted for approximately 85% of exports and almost 90% of fiscal revenue, while also representing more than 40% of the country’s overall GDP. According to the IMF’s 2016 World Economic Outlook, without massive internal initiatives to expand non-oil industries in Saudi Arabia, the country’s economic
growth would slow considerably through 2021, presenting major economic concerns for the future of the country. Consequently, Vision 2030 shows tourism as a means by which the country can diversify its economy. Specifically, Al Rashid has pointed to plans to establish a tourism investment fund, open an Islamic museum, increase the number of jobs in the tourism industry by 50%, and increase the number of visiting leisure tourists from 200,000 per year to 1.5 million per year by 2030. Furthermore, the government plans to build a metro network within Mecca as well as a high-speed railway system connecting Mecca and Medina, which will do wonders for accessibility and transportation within the country.

Under the Vision’s economic diversification strategy, the Crown Prince unveiled a mega tourism project on the Red Sea coast, aptly named the Red Sea Tourism Project. This project aims to transform 50 previously untouched, uninhabited islands into an ultra-luxury tourism destinations. Cumulatively, these fifty islands cover an area of approximately 34,000 square kilometers, which is equal to the size of Belgium. Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund (PIF) describes this project as “a luxury resort destination situated across the islands of a lagoon and steeped in nature and culture... [that] will set new standards for sustainable development and bring about the next generation of luxury travel to put Saudi Arabia on the international tourism map.” This project alone is expected to attract one million tourists each year, add 4 billion US dollars to the GDP per annum, and generate 35,000 jobs for the country.

And while all of these initiatives seem to describe positive reform for Saudi Arabia, their effect on religious tourism, and the hajj in particular, should not go unnoticed. The Red Sea Tourism project and other large-scale development plans for Mecca and Medina will have profound impacts on the traditional values, hospitality options, and general accommodations associated with the hajj.

GROWTH OF LUXURY TOURISM IN RELATION TO THE HAJJ

At the end of 2017, Saudi Arabia’s PIF formed two real estate development firms to boost the capacity of Mecca and Medina to retain pilgrims. The Fund is believed to have more than 180 billion US dollars to redevelop urban centers, starting with 115 buildings in the immediate vicinity surrounding the Grand Mosque in Mecca. One of seven major real estate initiatives laid out by PIF under the Vision 2030, this project will deliver more than 70,000 new hotel rooms and 9,000 new housing units. The Hyatt alone plans to open six new hotels between 2017-2020 across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), four of which will be located in Saudi Arabia. This development plan has elicited intense division of opinions among Muslims all over the world. Jerome Taylor, a journalist for The Independent, called these expansion projects a transformation of “Islam’s holiest site...into Vegas.” Similarly, Dr. Irfan al-Alawi, an executive director of the Islamic Heritage Research Foundation, called these new changes “cultural vandalism.”

The Washington-based Gulf Institute estimates that 95% of Mecca’s millennium-old buildings were demolished between 1990-2010 alone. Interestingly, this destruction has been aided by Wahhabism, a strict branch of Sunni Muslims that believes historical sites and shrines encourage idolatry and should therefore be destroyed. Wahhabism has remained the official creed of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia since the al-Sauds came to power in the 19th century, and Wahhabi doctrines support the demolition of culturally and religiously significant sites in Mecca. Contrary to the Wahhabism ideology, however, Crown Prince Salman has described this new phenomenon of modernization as a “[return] to what [Saudi Arabia was] before – a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world.”
This “before” refers to the era prior to the spread of ultra-conservatism through the Kingdom in the 1970s. Prince Salman and his father have taken seemingly legitimate steps towards returning the Kingdom to moderate Islam: in December of 2016, the king appointed religiously moderate clerics to the Council of Senior Scholars, the highest religious body in the country. Similarly, in 2017, mixed public events for both men and women were held, and cinemas were scheduled to reopen after 35 years of prohibition.37

Still, while many of these political and social advances appear to represent the best interests of the nation, not all Muslims support the prince’s recent development projects. The Abraj-al Bait clock tower and luxury hotel is one extremely controversial example of development and expansion in Mecca. Visitors can come enjoy the historical city of Mecca and then return to their Abraj-al Bait hotel room, which looks down upon the Kaaba. Towering 600 meters over the city, this development casts a shadow over the holy mosque, creating a literal and symbolic point of contention for many Muslims.38 During peak travel seasons, this hotel development can charge up to 7,000 US dollars per night for the hotel suites with the best views.39 Though this was the first hotel development of this size and stature, the PIF has plans to develop several more just like it in the surrounding neighborhood.

Furthermore, there has been rumor from the Islamic Heritage Research Foundation that Saudi authorities are working on building a retractable roof to extend over the Kaaba, a decision that Dr. Al Alawi asserts will “destroy the cradle of Islam.”40 Because the hajj often takes place during the hottest months of the year, the roof would serve as a relief from the hot sun and the long days of travel on foot. In line with Dr. Al Alawi’s critique, however, most Muslims believe that the mercy of God descends from the heavens, so a roof over one of the holiest sites in the world could elicit fervent reproach from the international Muslim community. Because Mecca and Medina are not protected under UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites, the Saudi government is legally free to “modernize” the cities in whatever way they see fit. Like the Abraj-al Bait clock tower, a roof over the Kaaba could have a serious impact on the traditional religious experience of the hajj.

New tourism developments are not being manipulated by the government alone; travel agencies all over the world are taking advantage of the increased accessibility and hospitality in Saudi Arabia. In line with the Westernization of Saudi Arabia’s tourism industry, travel agencies have made “luxury” travel packages accessible for wealthy Western tourists. These packages are extremely expensive, and often exploit luxury transportation and accommodation options that were previously foreign to the hajj experience. Touting 5-star hotel accommodations around Mecca and private, glamping41 style accommodations in Mina, many travel agencies are straying far from the basic, abstemious experience usually associated with the hajj. What is intended to be an equalizing journey for all Muslims has evolved into a business segmented by socioeconomic status indistinguishable from most other Westernized travel experiences, despite Saudi resistance to Western comparisons.

Dawn Travels, a travel agency that specializes in Umrah and hajj travel exclusively, offers consumers “affordable” hajj packages ranging from 5,800 US dollars per person to 9,400 US dollars per person.42 These prices are far from affordable for the standard pilgrim and often exclude visa and site entry fees. A study by Al Jazeera shows that, on average, the hajj can cost Malaysian pilgrims more than half a year’s salary and Bangladeshi pilgrims over three years’ salary.43 In 2018, even “economy” hajj packages for UK pilgrims cost more than 4,000 Pounds per traveler, up 25% in recent years.44 These standards are making the hajj an increasingly marginalizing experience targeted towards Muslim elites, which is contradictory to the purpose of

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the hajj in the first place. Historically, Meccans who lived along the path to Mecca would open up their homes to pilgrims, as there were no hotels for travelers to reside.\(^{45}\) This tradition has been almost entirely lost to the emergence of a progressively more extravagant hospitality industry surrounding Saudi Arabian tourism.

LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

In addition to all of the new developments on Saudi Arabia’s horizon, the Kingdom’s Ministry of Hajj and Umrah recently revealed plans to organize the hajj using a smartphone app for the future.\(^ {46}\) In theory, pilgrims would register through the app, upon which time they would receive a contactless card, earphones, and wristband. The contactless card will serve as a passport of sorts to get through immigration, as well as serve as a train ticket and hotel room key to make check-in more efficient.\(^ {47}\) This kind of technological advancement may function as another financial barrier to entry for pilgrims who do not own smartphones. The main counterargument holds that any improvements in the bureaucratic organization of the hajj will help increase the country’s capacity to house more pilgrims. So while increased resources may marginalize lower-class Muslim communities from making the pilgrimage, it will also create greater access for the masses.

Unfortunately, the sheer demand for the hajj will far outweigh any backlash to new real estate developments and technological advancements; it would take more than 581 years for all Muslims to take the hajj just once in their lifetimes.\(^ {48}\) Therefore, the number of Muslims marginalized by these changes will never be great enough to hinder new developments. Wealthier Muslim travelers can sustain pilgrim quotas for the hajj while also contributing greatly to the economy of the country. Nevertheless, the future of the hajj rests largely in the hands of the Saudi government, which has autonomous control over the religious and cultural sites in the Kingdom. Comparable in size to the tourism drawn by the Olympic games, the hajj entails massive logistical infrastructure pressures and planning. It is no surprise, then, that Crown Prince bin Salman is willing to go to such drastic lengths to ensure the growth and success of Saudi Arabia’s religious tourism industry. Though many of his initiatives represent fundamental shifts from traditional governmental attitudes surrounding tourists and the greater tourism industry, the true test of the Crown Prince’s Vision 2030 will be measured by the future of the hajj and the response of the international Muslim community to its pending changes.

CONCLUSION

The hajj is a sacred experience situated at the heart of Islamic history and tradition. A confirmation of Muslim faith, the hajj has historically brought Muslims of all kinds together to embark on a physical and spiritual journey to become closer to God. Up until the twenty-first century, the Saudi government has taken various measures to preserve the sanctity of the experience and its religious significance. As a result of increasing dependence on its volatile oil economy, however, Saudi Arabia has been forced to reevaluate its resources and take creative initiatives to diversify the types of industries contributing to its GDP so as to prevent an economic crisis. As the second largest income generator for the nation, Saudi Arabia’s tourism industry has been selected by several Saudi officials as a strategic channel for investment to lessen this dangerous reliance on oil. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in particular has been critical to the reassessment of the tourism industry, and has taken many controversial steps to grow the tourism business. As a result, the traditional values central to the hajj have seen a complete transformation in tandem with the luxury tourism industry.

Prince Salman’s main initiatives are outlined in his Vision 2030, a framework under which the prince plans to make Saudi Arabia the next economic center for the GCC, the greater Middle Eastern region, and ultimately the world at large. Though his plans are ambitious, the country has already made notable strides to change the face of Saudi tourism specifically. More accessible than ever, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a luxury travel destination in addition to a pinnacle of religious history. Between the Red Sea Tourism project, the massive development
projects surrounding Mecca, the installment of new transportation systems, and the opening of artificial cultural museums and centers, Saudi Arabia is targeting traveler demographics that the country has rarely seen before. And while these projects may all be successful in diversifying the nation’s economy and reducing dependence on oil, they will also have permanent ramifications for the international Muslim community.

With the price tag on the hajj rising exponentially, new luxury accommodations for this sacred pilgrimage will increasingly exclude large communities of Muslims from ever having the opportunity to embark on the experience. Though this kind of exclusion seems counterintuitive to the central purpose of the hajj in the first place, globalization has put more pressure on Saudi Arabia to grow its capacity for hajj travelers, and the Westernization of the experience appears to be the most logical response to those pressures. No longer will the journey of Muslim pilgrims be characterized by modesty and anti-materialistic attitudes, but rather by pristine beach resorts, luxury transportation, and 5-star hotel options. In many ways, this evolution seems natural; Saudi Arabia resisted Westernization for as long as it possibly could, and growing concern over the oil economy left officials no choice but to adapt accordingly. The fifth pillar of Islam does stipulate that the pilgrimage to Mecca is only required for those who are physically and financially able. The problem remains, nonetheless, in how Muslims will respond to the increased marginalization of lower-class Muslims from ever having the opportunity to visit these holy sites.

ENDNOTES:
5. Note: "Umrah" denotes voluntary trips to Islamic holy sites.
15. Ibid.


22. "Saudi Arabia Aims to Attract 1.5m Tourists by 2020."


30. Note: GCC is a political/economic alliance between Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.


33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.


37. Ibid.


39. Ibid.


41. Note: “Glamping” refers to a new phenomenon of luxury glamour-style camping.


technology/401205-saudi-ministry-reveals-vision-for-hajj-technology.
Facebook Walls and Separation Barriers

Palestinian Solidarity, Israeli Intervention, and the Construction of an Online Geography

Josh Kadish

Josh Kadish is a graduate student at IDC Herzliya in Israel where is receiving an MA in Government and is specializing in cyber-terrorism. During this time, he is interning for the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies and for the Institute for National Security Studies. He is a recent graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, where he majored in Modern Middle Eastern Studies and Political Science with a concentration in International Relations. Josh is interested in the ways in which digital and social media influences and constructs identity.
On November 12, 2018, the Israeli military targeted the headquarters of the Hamas-affiliated television station Al-Aqsa in an airstrike, with a journalist on Twitter sharing a video of the attack and confirming that the “#Hamas tv building was destroyed completely.”

Occurring in densely populated Gaza City, those in the Palestinian territories, as well as in the international community, used digital and social media technologies to spread video footage of the attack on YouTube and photos of the damage on Twitter. Attacks on media installations have become common occurrences in the history of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. Palestinian media has historically been targeted and undermined by the state of Israel, as well as by Palestinian leadership, although the tactics have evolved with the conflict and the occupation. In this incident, the Israeli military temporarily halted the broadcasting of state-affiliated...
television. Nevertheless, the long-term threat Israel faces from digital and social media becoming available to the Palestinian population is formidable. The fact that social media can transcend physical space offers Palestinians, who have struggled since 1948 to secure territorial statehood, the ability to achieve solidarity despite geographical division.

Since the 1967 war, when the Israeli military occupied the West Bank and Gaza, the fragmented Palestinian society has used different forms of media to attempt “to constitute themselves as a polity.” The Palestinian people are therefore an ideal case study for the implications of digital communication and media technologies in a population that is systematically marginalized within its homeland, subjugated in the occupied Palestinian territories, and living in a diaspora. Despite this physical fragmentation, digital media and social media platforms have produced a “transnational environment, where physical and bodily location simultaneously matters and does not matter.” These technologies maintain a network of solidarity between isolated Palestinian populations, especially among the growing youth populations; the Palestinian youth use these technologies in “enabling new forms of participation and alliances among Palestinians.”

This paper will examine the role of digital communication technologies, specifically digital and social media, in the construction of a transnational Palestinian network. It will argue that such technologies empower those living in the occupied Palestinian territories to produce a transnational solidarity that is independent of their physical, territorial limitations. This study will draw upon works exploring the historical trends of Palestinian media practices, the current trends of digital and social media practices among Palestinians, theoretical studies into information and communication technologies, and works on the relationship between media and imagined communities. As this field of study is ever-changing and ongoing, primary sources from digital and social media platforms will be used in order to illustrate Palestinian digital and social media practices. These sources will collectively demonstrate the significant role of digital and social media technologies in the construction and maintenance of transnational solidarity among the Palestinian people, especially youth living in the occupied Palestinian territories.

First, this paper will trace the historical role and significance of mass media in the Palestinian territories. This will provide background on the nature of the Palestinian people and, specifically, the role that media has played in the construction of Palestinian national identity. Then, the paper will examine the current Palestinian digital and social media landscape, specifically the restrictions imposed upon it and the current practices of Palestinians, with a focus on Palestinian youth living in the occupied Palestinian territories. This will reveal the importance of these technologies in the everyday lives of a community that is systematically marginalized and physically isolated from other members of their community. Finally, these practices will be evaluated to reveal how these technologies have extended the notion of a Palestinian national community to produce a transnational network and virtual community of Palestinians that is maintained irrespective of physical location.

**PALESTINIAN MASS MEDIA: HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Media has always had a central role in the construction of a Palestinian national identity. In the Ottoman province of Palestine, publications in Arabic and Turkish had already begun to circulate among literate Palestinian Arabs, and rapidly increased following the Young Turk Revolution, but the most significant “cornerstones of Palestine’s Arabic political journalism,” such as Filastin, al-Karmil, and al-Quds, were established following the outbreak of World War II. Palestinian media at this time, however, was in its infancy, largely due to Palestinian children run towards the Israeli West Bank barrier, a concrete manifestation of the geographical division faced by Palestinians. Justin McIntosh, Wikimedia Commons, 2004.
illiteracy in the region, but, following the establishment of the state of Israel and the Nakba, the media took on a manifestation central role in propagating Palestinian nationalism. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), founded in 1964, used media as “a state ideological apparatus” to promote its interests, establishing information infrastructure and radio broadcasting that enabled the PLO to act “as a nation-state in regard to constituting a Palestinian imagined community despite the structural state of dispersal in which most Palestinians lived.”

The PLO viewed media as fundamental to the continuation of a Palestinian nation and identity, particularly for its political objective of establishing an independent Palestinian state. The Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) was established by Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the PLO, while still in exile, prior to his arrival to Gaza in July 1994, in order to manage the official broadcasting of radio and television in cooperation with different Arab regimes. The PLO was able to maintain the Palestinian nation through its own narrative, constructed and shaped through the lens of its political objectives, rather than focusing on the reality of the Palestinian condition.

The establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994, as a result of the 1993 Oslo Accords, brought about the emergence of a new media regime in the Palestinian territories, although the focus remained on the political objectives of the Palestinian leadership rather than on the reality of Palestinian life. As the PA sought to control Palestinian society, it attempted to “establish a relationship of surveillance and control with the media” through “laws, rules, procedures, and norms that determine what is allowed and what is not in the field of publishing, broadcasting, and disseminating.”

The PA sought to control the Palestinian narrative and, thereby, control the construction and reproduction of the Palestinian nation and identity. As a dispersed and fragmented nation, the maintenance of Palestinian unity and solidarity was of utmost importance, specifically to achieve the goal of an independent Palestinian state. In order to maintain control, the PA centralized its authority over “the realms of freedom of speech and publication, with the PA seeking a policy of patronization, politicization and national reinforcement vis-à-vis the media.”

The PA immediately institutionalized its own media regime with the formation of a Ministry of Information, responsible for the coordination of information, media, and press in the Palestinian territories, and the Palestinian Press Law, which emphasized freedom of expression but prohibited the “publication of everything from security secrets to immoral or blasphemous material” and included “vague language that could be subject to virtually any interpretation.” The Palestinian media is thus reflective of the leadership’s political agenda as the Ministry of Information maintains control of the media and uses the ambiguous concept of ’national unity,’ which can easily be exploited, as a criterion for freedom of speech, expression, and the press.

The freedom of the press under Palestinian Authority control has largely been restricted by a “phenomenon of self-censorship” in which journalists avoid certain topics and refrain from “publishing information they possess due to fear that they will be prevented from covering events, or harassed, or even detained and physically abused.” The Palestinian Authority does not often explicitly harass the media as journalists largely abide by the norms and avoid being critical of the Palestinian leadership. In the official Palestinian press, the “Palestinian reality is subjugated to the efforts to achieve independence.”

The Palestinian leadership, namely those in the PLO and its dominating faction Fatah, have sought to “silence opponents and critics that threatened its preferred political order,” preventing various Palestinian political and social movements, such as the women’s movement, Islamic movements, and rights-based movements, from organizing and mobilizing in the political landscape of the Palestinian territories. These movements have been forced to organize “their social and political activities around the policies of the

"The PLO was able to maintain the Palestinian nation through its own narrative, constructed and shaped through the lens of its political objectives."
Thus, the Palestinian media landscape, produced by the Palestinian Authority’s media regime, continues to propagate the official political agenda of the leadership with little criticism and ignores the reality of Palestinian life.

For example, the 2005 Palestinian presidential election, following the Second Intifada, was widely covered among both Arab and Palestinian mass media. However, there were striking disparities between the coverage of the two major Palestinian political factions, namely Fatah, the dominating faction of the Palestinian Authority, and Hamas, the Islamist group that emerged during the First Intifada as an offshoot of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, Israel, and the European Union. The Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC TV), which falls under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, allocated 87.5% of its airtime to Fatah and only 1.0% of airtime to Hamas, which decided to boycott the presidential elections. In contrast, Al-Jazeera allocated 35.2% of airtime to Fatah and 37.3% to Hamas, providing “a more accurate reflection of the spectrum of political forces active in the Palestinian context and their respective weight in terms of popular support and political influence.” Since the 2005 elections, Fatah’s Mahmoud Abbas has remained in power of the Palestinian Authority, despite the lack of elections, while Hamas took over as the de facto government of Gaza in 2007. The Palestinian Authority has continued its oppressive surveillance and restrictive media practices, while Hamas has similarly centralized its control over the media in Gaza in order to maintain control over the media narrative.

The assumption of power by Hamas has resulted in a new media regime in Gaza. Since 2007, Hamas has targeted freedom of speech and freedom of the press more explicitly than the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. In 2007, Hamas created the Internal Security Force (ISF) to “combat politically motivated crimes” and has “expelled journalists, prevented them from leaving Gaza, confiscated their identity cards, seized and destroyed their equipment, or arbitrarily detained and assaulted them.” Hamas has a greater capacity to explicitly restrict these freedoms in Gaza, while the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank tends to intimidate journalists through more implicit actions and relies on self-censorship. These differing conditions amongst the Palestinian territories have exacerbated the fragmentation and divisions in the Palestinian people, a nation which is already physically separated. The media regimes of Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank disseminate the political agendas and narratives of their respective political leadership and, consequently, are producing different narratives and constructing different realities in the Palestinian territories.

Palestinian media has been central to the construction of a Palestinian national identity, but it has been exploited by Palestinian leadership, both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, in order to control the narrative and propagate their own respective political agendas. Thus, the media regimes that have been developed by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza have further divided a physically fragmented Palestinian nation. Furthermore, Palestinian media has never been truly reflective of the realities of Palestinian life but, rather, of the political agendas of the leadership. The physically divided Palestinian nation living in the West Bank and Gaza have consequently begun to reject the traditional forms of state-controlled media and transitioned towards new, and perhaps revolutionary, forms of media.

**THE PALESTINIAN DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE**

The advent of digital and social media transformed the landscape of the Palestinian territories. The official information infrastructures established by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and by Hamas in Gaza have prevented Palestinian civil society from propagating...
their own political agendas and from sharing their own narratives. This revolution of digital and social media has allowed for unfiltered and personalized journalism where “anyone can become a journalist.” However, there is a tendency to overstate the significance of these communication technologies. These new media technologies have often been presented as harbingers of political change, associating the participatory nature of these technologies with democratization in society. The debate among scholars is whether these technologies are tools for democratization or tools for surveillance and control by repressive regimes. For the purpose of this paper, “digital and social media” will be used as an umbrella term referring to a “set of internet-based, networked communication platforms” that “enable the convergence of public and personal communication” and includes “social network sites, video-sharing sites, blogging and microblogging platforms, and related tools that allow participants to create and share their own content.” These technologies “can be potent tools in fostering political transformation” but are still “dependent on political institutions and other non-media factors.” Democratization will not occur directly as a result of these communication technologies, but digital and social media are inherently tools for the expression of participatory culture, defined as a culture with “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; strong support for creating and sharing creations with others…and members who feel some degree of social connection with one another.”

Thus, rather than facilitating a political upheaval in the West Bank or in Gaza, digital and social media are significant for the purposes of creating and maintaining social connections among the dispersed and fragmented Palestinian nation.

In order to understand the digital and social media landscape, it is necessary to describe the steps taken by Israeli and Palestinian authorities to restrict access and usage of these digital and social media technologies. The digital and social media landscape of the Palestinian territories is similar to the physical landscape insofar as it is characterized by restrictions, limits, and control. It is impossible to separate the authorities who seek control over the Palestinian territories and the Palestinian nation from these new communication technologies, as they are actively seeking to extend their control from physical space to virtual space. Digital and social media usage and access among Palestinians is largely dependent on physical location. Palestinian citizens of Israel and residents of East Jerusalem receive their telecommunications services from Israeli companies, while the Palestinians residing in the West Bank and Gaza receive services from Palestinian telecommunications companies, which must operate through Israeli companies and only with permission from Israeli authorities. The disparity between the telecommunication sectors of Israel and the Palestinian territories is vast: the United Nations International Telecommunications Union ranked the information and communication technology (ICT) development of Israel as 23rd in the world, while Palestine was ranked 123rd. The restrictions placed upon the Palestinian telecommunications sector have severely delayed ICT development, as the few telecommunication companies in the Palestinian territories are unable to provide the most recently developed services, such as 3G, 4G, and LTE services. These restrictions hinder the capacity for Palestinians to access the Internet. In fact, Israel only recently lifted its restriction on 3G service in the West Bank in January 2018, while Gaza is still limited to 2G services. As a result, the average Internet speed through mobile data in the Palestinian territories is significantly slower than that of Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Internet speed through mobile data is especially significant in the Palestinian territories as the majority of Palestinians use mobile devices to access the Internet and social media.
platforms. The Israeli control over the Palestinian telecommunications sector and the development of information and communication technologies has proved to be a significant obstacle to digital and social media access and usage in the Palestinian territories.

Moreover, digital and social media have increasingly come under attack by Israeli and Palestinian authorities seeking to criminalize online activity. Israel’s security doctrine is based on “superiority in all strategic spheres, on land, sea, air, and cyberspace,” and, thus, views it necessary to ensure the capacity “to dominate any cyberspace battle.” Cyberspace, in this regard, is defined as “the notional environment in which communication over computer networks occurs.” It is in this cyberspace that Israel, as well as the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, have sought to further marginalize Palestinians in a manner similar to the aforementioned Palestinian Press Law. The Israeli Knesset passed the “Law on Authorities for the Prevention of Committing Crimes Through Use of an Internet Site” on July 17, 2017, which permits the full or partial blocking of access to internet websites, thereby expanding the physical separation barrier and blockade to the cyberspace.

The Palestinian political leadership, however, is aiding the Israeli government, as well as legislating its own restrictions on digital and social media activity. The Palestinian Authority relies on the Cybercrimes Law in order to detain Palestinians for posts on digital and social media that “would endanger the integrity of the Palestinian state, the public order or the internal or external security of the State.” Hamas, similarly, uses its legal code, specifically Article 262 on the “misuse of technology” of the 1963 Penal Code in the Gaza Strip, to criminalize social media posts that are critical of the leadership. These laws demonstrate the threat that digital and social media pose to the Palestinian establishment and to the Israeli government, but they have not significantly deterred Palestinians from using these communication technologies. In fact, there have only been 18 Palestinians detained by the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and 36 detained in the West Bank, while Israeli forces have detained 18 Palestinians. The criminalization of digital and social media is an alarming phenomenon, but it reveals the severity to which the leadership, both Israeli and Palestinian, view these technologies as a threat to their own authority and thus demonstrates the importance of digital and social media in the Palestinian territories.

These communication technologies circumvent the established political and media regimes, as content can be produced and consumed on these digital and social media platforms irrespective of the restrictions placed on the Palestinian people and media. These restrictions include the “tight control exerted by Israeli and Palestinian authorities on information; lack of freedom of movement in the region; physical assaults and harassment; ‘red lines’ which journalists are not supposed to cross in their coverage; limited economic and human resources.” Despite the criminalization of online content, these restrictions have not created the same phenomenon of self-censorship that occurs in traditional media. In fact, Palestinians reportedly consider family and community supervision as their primary concern when posting online, and at much greater numbers than considerations of monitoring and control by the Israeli government or by the Palestinian Authority, and only 21% of the Palestinians surveyed reported that they had been subjected to harassment online. Despite the efforts by the Israeli and Palestinian authorities, digital and social media platforms serve as networks and sources of information that “have emerged and are developing beyond the reach of security forces.” The attacks on digital and social media have thus proved insufficient and ineffective at countering the popularity of these technologies among the Palestinian nation.

The usage of digital and social media has become critical to the everyday lives of those living in the Palestinian territories as the cyberspace has provided the Palestinian nation the capacity to maintain a network of solidarity, despite its physical fragmentation, lack of truly sovereign...
"Digital and social media facilitate contact between the West Bank and Gaza and provide a space for linking the Palestinian nation."

and independent territory, and restrictions placed upon them in this digital space. The efforts to limit the usage of and access to digital and social media technologies in the Palestinian territories have not been successful deterrents, as evidenced by "a sharp increase in Internet connectivity and the use of social media platforms in Palestine." In 2017, an estimated 60.5% of the population in the West Bank and Gaza was using the internet. While the West Bank and Gaza are ranked 102nd and 101st, respectively, in the world for internet users, the extent to which digital and communication technologies are used in the territories is remarkable considering the barriers imposed on the Palestinians. In 2017, there were approximately 3,018,770 total internet users and 1.60 million active social media users, a notably large portion of the estimated 4.98 million Palestinians living in the occupied territories. These numbers will likely increase as the Palestinian population, with a growing youth population, gains greater access to digital and social media technologies. This is most evident in the distribution of Palestinian Facebook and Instagram users by age. On Facebook, 65% of users were in the 15-29 age range, while this age range is only 30% of the total population in the Palestinian territories. The youngest age range of Palestinians, specifically 14 years old and younger, is approximately 38% of the total Palestinian population, but only 1% of Facebook users. On Instagram, the distribution is similar, with 69% of Instagram users being in the 15-29 age range and only 2% of users being younger. As the youngest Palestinians begin to engage in the cyberspace, the usage of digital and social media in the Palestinian territories will continue to increase. It is clear that the Palestinian nation, in general, is actively using digital and social media technologies, but the Palestinian youth are the primary actors engaged in the cyberspace. These technologies have provided a space for youth engagement and for social connections beyond their localities. Palestinians, specifically the youth, are no longer bound by physical restrictions as digital and social media facilitate contact between the West Bank and Gaza and provide a space for linking the Palestinian nation.

It is difficult to determine, however, exactly how different digital and social media platforms are used, although there are some trends and habits among the Palestinian population. In general, "social media like Twitter and Facebook are means of facilitating interpersonal connections across a distance." It can thus be generalized that digital and social media are of great significance to Palestinians in facilitating connections with others in the occupied Palestinian territories, especially as a result of restrictions on their movement. Data collected on social media preferences among Palestinians revealed that the most commonly used social media platform among Palestinians was Facebook, with 80% of Palestinians using it; Facebook was followed by YouTube (70%), WhatsApp (69%), Instagram (68%), Snapchat (49%), and Twitter (31%). These platforms are used primarily for communicating with friends (75%) and for news updates (73%), followed by leisure (52%), work (41%), watching videos (40%), and staying up to date on new trends and developments (36%). Moreover, an overwhelming 90% of Palestinians surveyed reported that they used social media platforms as sources of news and daily updates. Similar to the development of the online newspaper, the usage of the Internet among the youth as a source of news is "not an innovation but a medium they have grown into." Digital and social media platforms, however, differ from newspapers, as these platforms have the power to create "new possibilities for sharing and recuperating collective memories for the Palestinians" and to "empower young people to author their own stories from a position of authority," thereby providing the Palestinian people, and the youth in particular, the capacity to produce their own narratives and upend official Palestinian media in the West Bank and Gaza.

While digital and social media are subject to repressive actions and exploitation, they are the most participatory and accessible forms of media, especially for the Palestinian population living under the media regimes of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. These communication technologies are the tools by which "individual voices can be heard, disagreements openly
aired, and nearly every aspect of politics and society held open to public scrutiny.”53 The power of the press in the Palestinian territories has long been tightly controlled and centralized within the governing authorities, creating a phenomenon of self-censorship and a fear of reprisal among journalists and citizens in the Palestinian territories. These digital and social media platforms, however, have empowered Palestinians to connect with each other, express themselves, and tell their own stories and narratives, thereby creating their own media regime that is a patchwork of individual experiences and is truly reflective of reality in the Palestinian territories.

**ONLINE PALESTINE: AN IMAGINED AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITY**

Media and tools of communication have historically been fundamental in the construction of imagined communities. For centuries, media has been critical to the process of impressing upon “the minds of people who have never met one another a belief they belonged to the same nation.”54 While these tools of communication are not solely responsible for the construction of an imagined community, they are significant in “fostering and manipulating national sentiments” and encouraging the members of the nation to “willingly participate in that nation’s political projects.”55 Historically, these imagined national communities have always been linked to a territory, as the consumption of media would occur within the defined boundaries of a territory, thereby linking the “massively replicated images and texts, mediated by the media, educational systems or administrations” to a specific territory and the people within it.56 This limitedness was a consequence of the tools available and the political regimes that controlled the media, the territory, and the people. It was almost impossible for the content disseminated by these regimes to reach distant geographical locations or different peoples, especially due to linguistic and cultural differences; these cultural and linguistic limitations strengthened and reinforced the imagined national community over a distinct, defined, and real territory.

The Palestinians are a unique case in the study of imagined national communities as the imagined Palestinian nation was constructed with a strong association to a territory: Palestine. The territory, however, was also the historical homeland of the Jewish people in the diaspora. Following the Nakba, which led to the dispersal and fragmentation of the Palestinian nation, the Palestinian imagined community remained strongly connected to its homeland. This was largely due to the aforementioned media apparatus employed by the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which maintained a strong Palestinian identity among those living in the Palestinian diaspora, those in the territories now known as the occupied Palestinian territories, and those who remained in the newly established state of Israel. Palestinian mass media continued to maintain a strong Palestinian identity among its dispersed nation, expanding “national imageries beyond their boundaries.”57 In the past, media disseminated nationalist sentiments through images and texts within a territory. However, advancements in these technologies like radio and television allowed for these nationalist sentiments to be broadcast across borders and without regard to territory. The breakdown of the link between territory and the consumption of media has rapidly increased with the development of digital and social media, allowing “some processes of imagination to take place…despite a change in geographical situation.”58 This is especially relevant to the Palestinian nation, which maintains its imagined community despite its lack of a sovereign territory. The national imagination, as a result of these communication technologies, can serve as “a continuation or extension of what is imagined in the homeland,”59 and, for the Palestinians, this occurs despite the loss of their homeland to the state of Israel. Digital and social media technologies have maintained this imagined Palestinian national community among the Palestinian population regardless of physical location.

In the Palestinian territories, this imagined national community remains strong and, through digital and social media technologies, has produced an online Palestinian community in the cyberspace. This virtual Palestinian community transcends the physical limitations of the Palestinian territories, especially the restrictions on movement and on their capacity to interact with one another. In this virtual Palestinian community, Palestinians in the West Bank and in Gaza exist in the same “virtual, territorial blind space.”60 This virtual space is transnational in nature, uniting the West Bank and Gaza without consideration for the state of Israel, the Israeli separation barrier, and the blockade of the Gaza Strip. Whereas physical walls and checkpoints are physical aspects of control and surveillance that impose real constraints on Palestinian existence, these new media technologies create a “space where peoples
geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other”\textsuperscript{61} and thereby produce a transnational environment for Palestinians to coexist, despite their physical fragmentation. This space is critical for the production and maintenance of Palestinian solidarity, connecting the lives and experiences of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. While the reality of life in the Palestinian territories is characterized by boundaries, the online Palestinian community has the capacity to imagine and to actualize a Palestinian community whose members are in solidarity with one another.

The virtual Palestinian community is an online geography shaped by its digital applications, as these applications offer the services that characterize what is possible in this virtual space and its interactions with the physical world. There are approximately 114 uniquely Palestinian applications, excluding the digital and social media platforms that are available globally. The majority of these applications are news sources and services. Service applications provide services to citizens, such as vacant jobs, transport services, and municipal services, thereby blending the cyberspace with the physical world.\textsuperscript{62} This is the general theme of Palestinian digital applications: whereas information applications provide information on specific subjects in Palestine, travel applications provide information on touristic places in Palestine like maps, restaurants, and shopping centers. Social applications provide information on Palestinian social life, as well as petitions and signature collections.\textsuperscript{63} The online geography of the virtual Palestinian community is deeply intertwined with the reality of life in the Palestinian territories, yet transcends territorial boundaries and physical limitations. It is through this online geography that the Palestinians articulate “desired realities that may materialize in the future”\textsuperscript{64} and establish a common space for Palestinian communal life and solidarity. The virtual Palestinian community thus serves as a reflection of the present and future realities of the Palestinian nation and the Palestinian territories.

The capacity of Palestinians, especially the youth, to document their experiences and share forms of media through digital and social media platforms has further transformed and strengthened the Palestinian nation and its national imagination, especially for those living in the Palestinian territories where “telephone and Internet connections are their only links to the outside world.”\textsuperscript{65} Digital and social media have facilitated the production of this transnational space for the Palestinian nation to exist, irrespective of the controls imposed upon them in reality, where they can contribute to the virtual Palestinian nation and its national imagination. One case that highlights this phenomenon is Fatma Abu Musabbeh, a 21-year-old social media influencer in Gaza City, who uses her Instagram account, @Fatma_abu_musabbeh, to beautify the online Palestinian geography through a collection of photos of Gaza that are viewed by her approximately 209,000 Instagram followers.\textsuperscript{66} These photos, including sunsets over the Gaza City skyline and scenes of children playing on the beach, reveal positive aspects of life in Gaza, in contrast to focusing on the conflict and the occupation. While her Instagram profile may not reflect the complete reality of life in Gaza, these imageries reinforce the imagination of the virtual Palestinian community whereby “the imagined in that sense is more real than the physical.”\textsuperscript{67} Palestinians in Gaza, such as Fatma Abu Musabbeh, are unable to leave without the unlikely permission of Israel or Egypt, and it is similarly unlikely that Palestinians in the West Bank will visit Gaza in their lifetimes. Thus, these imageries on digital communication platforms produce and maintain the national imagination of a Palestinian community, the majority of whose members will never share the same physical space. The cyberspace, transnational and virtual in nature, serves as a placeholder for a nation without a physical territory and as a location in which the national imagination can be continuously produced.
nation, specifically in the Palestinian territories, has used digital and social media technologies to produce a network that connects the West Bank and Gaza and, consequently, has produced a virtual community in which the Palestinians can continuously produce and consume national imagiers to reinforce the Palestinian national identity. The online Palestinian nation has the capacity to experience a solidarity made possible by developments in communication technology. Digital and social media have provided a virtual space for the Palestinian nation to escape the limitations of life in the Palestinian territories, bypass the Israeli separation barrier and the blockade of Gaza, and experience a solidarity independent of territory.

**CONCLUSION**

The Palestinian nation has struggled to obtain a real, sovereign state since its dispossession from its territorial homeland in 1948. Through digital and social media, the Palestinian nation has secured a different form of autonomy in an online, virtual Palestinian community that is independent of the physical world. Palestinian solidarity has been maintained despite geographic dispersion, with help from Palestinian mass media. This media, which has continuously produced and reproduced Palestinian national identity, has been controlled by Palestinian political leadership and, thus, has reflected their own political agendas. Digital and social media have empowered the Palestinian people with the capacity to reveal the reality of life in the occupied territories and, thus, base Palestinian national solidarity in their reality. The production of an online, virtual Palestinian community that connects the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza has provided the Palestinian nation a space to exist together irrespective of political leadership and geographical limitations.

Most academic inquiries into the nature and usage of digital and social media in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict tend to focus on the weaponization and politicization of these technologies, especially by the Israeli state and military. However, it is equally as significant to focus on the means by which these technologies can bring divided populations together, especially in the case of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. These technologies are not inherently democratizing and there is a great capacity for exploitation by repressive regimes. It is important to refrain from ascribing to technological determinism, but social determinism is equally reductionist. An online Palestinian community will not resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict nor bring peace to the Middle East, but it does provide a space in which the Palestinian nation can exist united in solidarity.

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Technology and Jordan's Future
An interview with Karim Kawar

Al Noor Staff

His Excellency Karim Kawar served as Ambassador of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the United States and Mexico from 2002 to 2007. He graduated in 1987 from Boston College’s Carroll School of Management with degrees in finance and computer science. Appointed to the Economic Consultative Council by King Abdullah II, Ambassador Kawar has spent his career intertwining technology, business, and the relationship between the United States and Jordan. He is President of Kawar Group and serves as chairman of IrisGuard, which he co-founded in 2001 with Imad Malhas. Ambassador Kawar also co-founded Oasis 500, where he is currently director, and has been acknowledged as a Young Global Leader and an Eisenhower Fellow. Ambassador Kawar is also known for the REACH Initiative and was a founding member of several organizations including the EDAMA Initiative for Sustainable Energy, Water, and Environment. Beyond his work in the IT sector, Ambassador Kawar and his wife Luma co-founded the Bridges of Understanding Foundation.
Few biographies demonstrate the initiative and versatility seen in that of His Excellency Ambassador Karim Kawar. His record speaks for itself regarding his skill as an entrepreneur and an executive. Yet his involvement in diplomacy makes it impossible to pigeonhole his interests and abilities. Ambassador Kawar advised His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan on the Economic Consultative Council, contributing his intellect and experience towards decisions about Jordan’s long-term business development. As Ambassador, he led the Jordanian Embassy in the post-9/11 period and was appointed to the Board of Trustees of the King Abdullah II Fund for Development. His work has also advanced humanitarian efforts across the wider region. The company he co-founded in 2001, IrisGuard, offers cashless transactions to Syrian refugees through the UNHCR in order to encourage financial inclusion.
Ambassador Kawar holds a special place in the history of this journal as the founder of Al Noor during his time at Boston College. Our staff spoke with Ambassador Kawar about his achievements, legacy, and hopes for the future.

The following interview took place on April 10, 2019.

What sparked your interest in Information Technology and Computer Science?

Kawar: It’s a funny story. We used to go to Beirut for summer holidays before 1975, and then, when the Lebanese Civil War started, we ended up going to the U.K. during the summer for several trips. In 1980, I was looking through a magazine and they had a picture of a computer called the Sinclair ZX80. It used to sell for £70. So, I told my dad that it would be great to have this new computer. He said, “It’s neither Christmas nor your birthday, so I cannot justify giving you this present.” We were staying in this flat in London when a package came for “K. Kawar,” so I opened it up and it was the computer I had shown my father. I immediately connected it to the TV we had at the time. It came with a cassette recorder. I opened the book that came with it and started to learn to code in BASIC. By the time my father came in late that evening, I gave him a big hug and said “Thank you. What a great gift!” He said, “What gift?” I said, “The computer I asked you about it.” He said, “What are you talking about?” I showed him the package and my father said it must have been for my uncle Kamal Kawar, who had the same initials as me. My father ended up buying one for my uncle, then. That’s how my interest in programming actually started, and it was fun and challenging.

I then moved onto the Apple II. When I was still in high school, I set up a computer lab and was teaching my teachers how to use the Apple IIE at the time. When I got to Boston College, the credit goes to Professor Olivieri, who provided me with a lot of inspiration. This was around when the Mac was first introduced, January 24, 1984, and it had a big impact because of its user interface. It has been a fun journey.

Let’s move on and talk about some of the work you’ve done in Jordan. You’ve been recognized as a leader in development in Jordan’s IT sector. Around the turn of the 21st century, you were a leader within the REACH Initiative and a member of Jordan’s Economic Consultative Council. Could you explain the goals of these two organizations and discuss how you accomplished them? What were your major goals for Jordan’s development in the late 1990s and early 2000s?

Kawar: I went back to Jordan in 1987 and started my first business, which distributed Apple computers. We followed this with the first company that created packaged software in Arabic for the Mac, and then the first internet service provider in the country. I grew up in a family that promoted public service, so I was focused on my business, but also focused on the need to give back to the community. I was the president of the Jordan Computer Society for three terms. It was an organization that mainly focused on professionals working in the IT sector in Jordan. When the late King Hussein passed and King Abdullah ascended the throne, he looked at Jordan and the challenges it was facing. Primarily, this was the lack of job opportunities for the youth, which remains today. His Majesty the King was intrigued by the ICT [Information and Communications Technology] opportunities and so challenged a group of us, asking, “What can you do to create an ICT industry in Jordan?” We had a few companies that were working on different projects, so we decided to work collectively to put this plan together. The first time we presented it, the King...
background, so what he needed from us was an action plan: tell me what needs to be done, by whom, and when. His Majesty the King was quite involved and called every other week asking about where we were in the action plan. He would pick up the phone and called the Head of Customs saying, “There are now no more custom duties on computers, why haven’t you done this yet?” This is how we achieved a lot of progress.

This was under the REACH initiative, which is an acronym: in order for Jordan to have a world-class ICT industry, it needed the Regulatory framework to make sure we could protect information and intellectual property rights. We also needed an Enabling environment, so regardless of your location in Jordan you could have access to the communication capabilities that help you run a business in the ICT sector. The ‘A’ stands for the Advancement of national IT projects, where the government would help contract the development of these applications. Finally, we had Capital, financing, and Human capital development. This was the REACH initiative. More importantly, the initiative was about getting these things done. We’ve come a long way in Jordan.

The Economic Consultative Council was a group of 20 advisors to His Majesty the King. We worked closely with them with a long-term rather than short-term mindset. We needed something that would last longer than a single prime minister’s term.

Let’s move on to your time as Jordanian ambassador to the United States and Mexico, which is a post you held from 2002 to early 2007. Of course, when you began, you were already one of the leading figures in Jordan’s ICT development. Did the post as ambassador give you a chance to further those goals of developing the ICT industry in Jordan, and if so, how did you go about that in your capacity as ambassador?

Kawar: Jordan had entered into a free trade area agreement with the United States. We were the fourth country after Canada, Mexico, and Israel to have such an agreement. It was key for us to focus on economic cooperation but also to focus on exports, and frankly that agreement for Jordan and the U.S. has been successful for both nations. ICT was part of my focus, but not the only focus. Our embassy is relatively small compared to other embassies or other missions in Washington, D.C. Nevertheless, I had a great team to work with - the diplomats who were there - and I tried to bring entrepreneurship into our functioning as an embassy. We implemented a CRM system, which was Customer Relationship Management. Many of the diplomats said, “Customers? We’re an embassy. We don’t have customers.” But everybody who reaches out to us is a customer and should be treated as such. We grew a database of 2000 email addresses to 8000 relationships by the time I left, and every one of those relationships could be somebody just needing a visa to visit Jordan but also someone looking to invest or buy or sell products across the ocean.

What was your proudest achievement as ambassador?

Kawar: I think as an ambassador I was building on what my predecessors have achieved, but for me in particular, I think it was sailing this ship during some tough times. My position in Washington came after the attacks on New York and Virginia on September 11th, 2001, and this worsened the war on Afghanistan and Iraq. This wasn’t an easy period to do work, but I think managing that ship and staying the course and capitalizing on the relationship that we’ve had between Jordan and the US was quite an achievement. In terms of Jordan being a poor country in its natural resources, and based on the strategic partnership we have with the U.S., we’ve managed to increase the level of assistance that
the US provides to Jordan. Frankly, I like to think of it not as assistance but as getting a return on an investment into that relationship. Jordan today is probably one of the strongest partners for the U.S. in our region, and Jordan helps to work on addressing the many challenges that we jointly face.

September 11, 2001 was prior to my posting in the U.S. We had faced attacks on three hotels in Amman on our 9/11, which was the 9th of November, 2005. And I think that date was not by coincidence, but was planned by Zarqawi, who led the attacks on those hotels. Unfortunately, whether it is in New York, Amman, or another place around the world, no capital or city is immune from terrorist attacks. What we need to do is address the root causes of terrorism, which involves addressing the injustice that still remains in many parts of the world, especially in the Middle East.

Towards the end of our term in Washington, we realized what a narrow view the media presents on the world and on our region specifically. If you watch any of the major news outlets they all focus on the negative side of the region, and unfortunately this is what news has become. We knew that there is so much more that our friends in the U.S. need to see and understand. So, we started by organizing trips for friends of ours. Through various senators’ introductions, we started to find people who have a large sphere of influence but who have never traveled to our part of the world. We would lead journeys for them to explore and interact. Many of those people, or even all of those people, came back with such a different view than what was presented to them through the narrow lens of the media. We thought that, of course, we need to have a larger audience, an audience that can have an impact in the future, and we focused on the youth. We started a program called Youth Talk, where we set up video-conferencing facilities in high schools so we could do pairing between US high schools and high schools across the Arab world. Those students would engage in a term and in a structured curriculum where they would exchange ideas and explore the different cultures. It was fascinating to participate in some of those conversations and to see the candidness with which those students would ask questions of each other. At the end of that program, the understanding on both sides reached new highs that we had never imagined as the outcome, and it’s been very rewarding to see the results.

After ten years, we discovered an organization called Soliya doing a similar program but on a university level, which we thought was a progressive view. We merged our organization with theirs, and now we are known as Soliya. They have an award—called the Building Bridges Award—that they grant on an annual basis to those individuals who have the highest impact in helping understanding between Americans and Arabs.

Now I wanted to move on to your current position as the president of the Kawar Group, which was founded by your grandfather. How have you brought your legacy of IT innovation to your work at the Kawar Group?

Kawar: I am lucky to have my father, who’s still with us, but he suffers from dementia. He was very accommodating of his son’s decision to work on his own rather than just to join the family business, which was shipping and logistics at the time. He allowed me to pursue my passion and he financed the first company that we started. So today, Kawar Group, in addition to its traditional lines of business, has expanded into technology and into renewable energy. In technology, I’m proud of a company called IrisGuard that has made some major breakthroughs. We have empowered the UNHCR—the Higher Commission for Refugees—to register all Syrian refugees with their irises. Once registered, they are able to go to an ATM machine without a bank account, without a card, without a PIN, with just their iris and access their financial assistance with dignity. IrisGuard has focused on financial inclusion and preserving the dignity and...
respect for those who are marginalized within our society. And now, this company works globally to serve the unbanked around the world. So it has been very rewarding to see a company that’s doing well by doing good and achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

In the remaining time we have, I wanted to look toward the future. We’re moving into another turbulent time in the Middle East and I wanted to ask you about your thoughts on the near future of the Middle East, and particularly the role you see technological development playing in the promotion of stability and prosperity of the region.

Kawar: I think the future is bright. In Jordan and across the region, a large percentage of our population is under the age of 30—in some countries it’s as high as 70%—so there is a huge number of young people who are getting their higher education and looking for opportunities in the job market. In the ICT sector today, it is much easier to start a venture. Those garage businesses that we see—such as Apple, which at one point was the company with the highest market cap—do not require a lot of energy to get started. They don’t require production lines. They don’t require special facilities. I think these endeavors build primarily on the youth: their education, their innovation, and their creativity. One of the organizations that I am proud to have co-founded is called Oasis 500, which is an accelerator that also provides seed funding.

We have invested in over 150 companies in the past seven years, many of which are owned and managed by women. Women have been twice as successful as men in the businesses we have funded. I see that as a very promising future, but also recognize that there needs to be a focus on changing the culture. We need to create a culture that is willing to accept failure—ours is still resistant to failure, but those who are in this space realize that you cannot succeed without failing at least once or twice.

As we conclude our conversation, is there anything that you would like to elaborate on or mention?

Kawar: I will actually be attending an event today on blockchain technology, which is quite promising. That’s something that Iris Guard is already doing with the World Food Program [WFP]. We have facilitated a private Ethereum [a cryptocurrency, similar to Bitcoin] network where refugees can go into supermarkets, buy their foodstuffs, and pay at the cash register through the WFP account and on the blockchain [a secure, decentralized ledger system]. They have eliminated all the middle men in the process, and this has proven to be a great success. I think that new technologies, including blockchain, will have a big impact, as will artificial intelligence. A lot can be done in this area. I think today if you give a young person access to the Internet and provide some guidance on where they can invest their time online, rather than just playing games or sharing silly videos, they can be productive. They can invest in their lifelong learning. They can challenge themselves and try to be more productive and make a change. Society is now more than ready for that. In our part of the world, particularly in Jordan, we have a higher mobile and higher smartphone penetration rate than that of the United States. People are quite accustomed to having these mobile devices and running their apps. Some of these people don’t even have laptops or access to desktop computers, so their whole lives are conducted through smartphones and mobile devices. They are quite familiar with apps. They rely on them. They are part of their daily interactions. This is where I think we can leapfrog in this part of the world, going into apps and doing more—we can see higher adoption rates when it comes to new technologies.
Drought of Manhood

NORMALIZING MALE INFERTILITY IN LEBANON

Donya Zarrinnegar

Donya Zarrinnegar is a second-year pre-medical student at the University of Pennsylvania, with interests in modern Middle Eastern studies and biological sciences. She focuses on exploring interdisciplinary connections between culture, gender, and sexuality to challenge dominant media portrayals of the Middle East. At the University of Pennsylvania, she is involved with the student organization PURE (Penn Undergraduates for Refugee Empowerment). Through PURE, she works with the nonprofit organization Paper Airplanes, tutoring Syrian students in English to bridge gaps in language education.
Infertility — the inability of a sexually active, non-contracepting couple to achieve pregnancy in 12 months or more — affects more than 80 million individuals globally, translating to 10-15% of all couples. In 40-50% of all cases, the man in a partnership is the cause of a couple’s infertility. Male infertility is a particularly agonizing health condition in the pronatalist Middle East, where society values marriage and children highly. Because of the cultural role of males in the Middle East, infertility has greater consequences. Making matters worse, male infertility in this region is extremely prevalent and accounts for approximately 60-70% of all male infertility worldwide. Although this reproductive condition remains largely hidden and poorly studied — even in the West — with males
receiving less attention in fertility research, male conditions including oligospermia (low sperm count), asthenospermia (poor sperm motility), teratospermia (abnormal sperm morphology) and azoospermia (total absence of motile sperm) contribute to more than half of all cases. Male infertility is arguably one of the most highly stigmatized health conditions in the Middle East, where virility and fertility are directly tied to cultural perceptions of manhood. Therefore, this reproductive condition can be emasculating, eroding a man’s basis for patriarchal authority and community standing and creating a tendency to place the blame for infertility on the female partner.

Male reproductive health issues are especially pervasive in Lebanon, a nation in epidemiological transition after 17 years of civil war and highly urbanized lifestyles. While the effects of the prolonged conflict and war-related trauma have been studied in relation to their reproductive health impacts, further research is necessary to confirm results. Current case studies reflect a potential correlation between the atrocities of the Lebanese Civil War and reproductive risk factors, due to nationally increased levels of chemical toxins, injuries, and stress, which are key contributors to low sperm count. In addition to environmental factors, genetic predispositions of recessively inherited disorders due to high rates of consanguinity increase the risk of developing infertility.

This paper will examine the effect of infertility on the perception of men in Lebanon through medical, anthropological, and gendered perspectives. First, infertility will be analyzed not only as a medical issue but also as a social and psychological one, with strong links to issues surrounding the social stigmas of virility. Secondly, it will examine the magnitude of infertility in Lebanon compared to other parts of the world. Finally, the paper will explore the deep-seated relationship between infertility and religion in the most religiously diverse state in the Middle East, as well as the inevitable complications that arise.

This paper concludes with a discussion on shifting perceptions of masculinity and the emergence of alternative methods of family formation.

This paper will begin with a discussion on the environmental and behavioral causes behind the high rates of infertility in the Middle East, particularly Lebanon. Next, the background section will analyze the current climate of gender norms and notions of manhood in Lebanon, using results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey. The paper will continue on to shed light on the detrimental association between infertility, stigma, masculinity, and issues of disclosure by exposing the cultural disapproval of adoption and gamete donation. The third section will outline the evolving attitudes in Lebanon toward adoption and gamete donation. Both of these processes are prohibited in the Sunni Muslim world but are slowly gaining acceptance in nations with significant Shia populations, like Iran and Lebanon. Ultimately, the paper aims to shine light on contemporary perspectives and specifically on how progressive moral stances on this topic may liberalize alternative routes to family formation.

CAUSES OF HIGH INFERTILITY RISKS: PAST CONFLICT AND CONSANGUINITY

Approaching the risk factors of male infertility in Lebanon from an environmental standpoint requires examining the relationship between reproductive health, the 17-year Lebanese Civil War, and seven years of postwar economic crisis. Though the manner in which armed conflict affects male fertility is not well understood, it is clear that war-related exposures and traumas—including multifarious reproductive toxins, psychological stress, and injury of the reproductive tract—place men at an increased risk of infertility both during and after a war. The psychological stress from the direct impact of war as well as the deterioration of physical infrastructure and socioeconomic conditions negatively correlate with various factors of semen quality.
The Lebanese Civil War of 1975-90 has increasingly become the focus of research, as it was fought between multiple ethno-religious groups, involved occupation of American, Israeli, and Syrian forces, and resulted in a dramatic transformation of the nation's infrastructure. Moreover, Lebanon has fallen victim to a series of global conflicts in the past 25 years, including the 8-year Iran–Iraq War, the Lebanese Civil War, the Second Gulf War, internal strife following the assassination of prime minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, and the month-long clash between Israel and Hezbollah in July 2006. The one month Israel-Hezbollah conflict profoundly affected the physical environment of the nation, as thousands of hectares of agricultural land and greenhouses were destroyed and oil leaked into the Mediterranean Sea, impacting air and water quality and the health of civilians.

A study conducted in two IVF clinics in Beirut, Lebanon during the eight-month period from January to August 2003 examined the long-term impact of conflict on reproductive male health through a series of semi-structured interviews utilizing software analysis. Using 120 infertile male cases with repeatedly abnormal semen analyses and 100 fertile male cases with the ability to conceive a child for at least the prior 12 months, the study linked the effects of exposure to the Lebanese Civil War to sexual impotency. Results revealed a 57% increase in likelihood of exposure to war-related events among infertility cases compared to the control group. Many participated in the war as fighters or resided in areas of heavy bombing, and reported severe war-related traumas. The majority of cases who reported exposure were oligospermic, with sperm counts of less than 20 million/mL, including “85% of the cases who were injured…92% of the cases who reported taking part in the war as combatants, [and] 87% of the cases who reported being displaced from their homes.” Effects of stress on the reproductive system possibly impact the hormonal component of spermatogenesis: testicular biopsies of subjects under mild stress reflect depressed levels of testosterone and luteinizing hormone, due to the “release of endogenous opioids and increased cortisol levels along the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis.” In addition to stress, environmental toxins are rampant in the highly polluted urban center of Beirut. Environmental toxins range from lead, a prevalent air pollutant in gasoline and known cause of spermatotoxicity, to pesticides and heavy metals like depleted uranium used in American and Israeli-deployed bombs and artillery. However, Lebanon has one of the highest smoking rates in the Arab world. Though the direct correlation is unclear, studies denote cigarette smoking as detrimental to sperm concentration, motility and morphology,
meaning that this factor could present an alternative explanation or play an intensifying role in the presented results.¹⁴

Next, a genetics-based approach can be employed to question whether regularly practiced and socially supported customs like consanguineous marriage have health consequences. Consanguinity is the intermarriage of two individuals who share at least one ancestor, no more distant than a great-grandparent. Many in the Middle East consider marriage most ideal in the form of patrilinical parallel cousin marriage due primarily to sociocultural factors. Though less common in Lebanon, consanguinity is still a prevailing problem with 25% of all marriages being between relatives.¹⁵

Known to increase the rate of homozygous genotype expression, consanguinity results in offspring with recessive autosomal mutations and heightened risk for recessively inherited disorders. Studies show a strong correlation between consanguinity and rare, incurable genetic sperm defects, which affect sperm motility.

A clinically-based case-control study aimed to investigate the effects of consanguineous marriage practices on male factor infertility in Lebanon, where rates stand at approximately 29.6% among Muslims and 16.5% among Christians. Conducted by medical anthropologist and Yale University Professor Marcia C. Inhorn, the study analyzed data from the same interview results in the two IVF clinics as did the Lebanese Civil War study. Results reflected a higher rate of first-degree (parental) and second-degree (grandparental) consanguinity among the infertile male patients than controls. There was a clear pattern of family clustering of male factor infertility with patients who reported a history of infertility among close male relatives. Additionally, conditions such as azoospermia and severe oligospermia were closely associated to familial marriages.¹⁶ Findings suggest a genetic predisposition to male infertility, with consanguinity linked to rare recessive sperm defects of both the X and Y chromosomes. In Lebanon and other Middle Eastern states, religion is often used to reason genetic diseases as displays of God's will, rather than consequences of consanguinity. Therefore, to comprehensively understand the relationship between consanguinity and genetic disorders, it is necessary to establish medical and epidemiological research, as well as comprehensive religious intervention programs.¹⁷

CURRENT CLIMATE OF GENDER NORMS IN LEBANON

Modern-day Lebanon is a mosaic of religions, traditions, and cultures which is currently experiencing simultaneous social transformations. According to the International Men and Gender Equality Survey of the Middle East and North Africa, Lebanon is experiencing several primary threats to efforts toward gender equality in the state due to rippling effects of recent regional dissension and the presence of nearly 2 million Syrian and Palestinian refugees.¹⁸ Though not in active warfare, ongoing conflict in the region directly impacts Lebanon, as it is home to the most refugees per capita of any country in the world.¹⁹ Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the refugee crisis has most significantly impacted notions of masculinity in Lebanon by adding economic stress factors and resulting notions of emasculation to household relations. The effects of population influx on infrastructure—including increased rental prices.
cost of living, and challenges to the supply of health and education services—and the realities of Lebanon’s fragile power-sharing system post-civil war, have directly shaped definitions of manhood. Interviews conducted with men and women in Lebanon on sexuality, sexual identity, and reproductive health issues all perpetuate claims that sexual function is inextricable from the essence of masculinity among Middle Eastern men. Male participants, more so than females, commonly reported high expectations for their sexual function, with 48% condoning the claim that “men need sex more than women do” and 28% stating that a “man should be embarrassed if he cannot perform sexually.”

On the scope of mental health and consequences of war, a substantial number of men and women reported experiencing depressive symptoms, most notably female and Syrian male participants. 40% of female respondents, as compared to 28% of male respondents, disclosed feeling depressed within the previous week. The gap is possibly a result of gendered societal stigma and expectations, and women may be more aware and comfortable reporting symptoms of mental illness. The study suggested that women may be more forthcoming in providing information on men’s depression and sources than men themselves; various female participants articulated the societal pressures men face and the possible reasons they suppress emotion and signs of vulnerability. War and displacement were the two primarily cited causes for depression, stemming from low morale, low self-esteem, and feelings of emotional numbness during wartime. Syrian men frequently reported feelings of economic stress, often due to unstable work or income. 43% of all men surveyed in Lebanon reported feeling “frequently stressed or depressed because of not having enough work or income,” and 39% reported feeling “sometimes ashamed to face their family because of not having enough work or income.”

Interestingly, there was a role reversal noted, especially among the Syrian refugee participants, as many of the male respondents are no longer able to provide financially, either partially or fully, during the war. Women have begun adopting roles as providers, resulting in social shifts and changes in the meaning of manhood, as economic liability is no longer viewed as solely a man’s responsibility. The increasing fluidity in the meaning of manhood in Lebanon may potentially destigmatize male inability to provide financially and reproduce. These increased causes for emasculation and loss of manhood have the capacity to transform societal perceptions of male vulnerabilities and strengthen efforts towards their normalization.

**EFFECT OF INFERTILITY ON SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS: CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS STIGMAS**

Male infertility is distinctive in the realm of health conditions, as its outward invisibility prevents it from sharing the “discredited” status of health conditions that compromise individuals’ social lives. Infertility is an impairment hidden from the public gaze and often even the individual, with many men first uncovering their infertility through post-marital semen analysis. The health condition generates tension for males in terms of feeling like a failure in various social contexts, leading to questions of whether one should attempt to “pass as normal” and inevitably pass the blame onto the woman, or instead bear the burden of differentiation. Now, male infertility is reported at higher and more severe rates in the Middle East than in western Europe and the United States, with approximately 60-70% of patient cases at the IVF clinics in Egypt and Lebanon attributed to male factor infertility.

This difference is due partially to the lower rates of sexually transmitted diseases and subsequent fewer cases of primary tubal factor infertility in women, but can be primarily attributed to genetic factors, specifically genetic anomalies of Y-chromosome microdeletions attributed to consanguineous marriage.

Religion strongly shapes men’s views of the cause of their infertility; rather than connecting environmental factors of excessive tobacco use to...
"Secrecy and male nonresponse create a mutual cult of silence in a marriage and often cause wives to publicly take on the blame of infertility."

poor sperm motility and low sperm count, men tie their condition to actions they deem immoral, including premarital sexual activity, STDs, and masturbation. The societal structure of the Middle East also creates pressure to continue the patriarchal structure of families, since “descent and inheritance, as well as individual names and identities, [are] figured through the father’s side.” Men achieve social standing in the patrilineal extended family through kinship, particularly through the birth of sons, who adopt and perpetuate the same system in the future. Men who do not procreate and thus fail to become family patriarchs are deemed weak and ineffective, and are often even encouraged to take on additional wives in hopes of increasing their chance of procreation. Men exhibit homosocial competition in realms of virility and fertility as a means of public presentation as well. Ouzgane, an expert on contemporary Arabic literature, emphasizes the vitality of sustaining an image as a powerful, virile patriarch with the claim that “virility emerges as the ‘essence of Arab masculinity’ in the novels of some of the region’s most eminent writers, with men distinguishing themselves and being distinguished from other men, through the fathering of children, and especially sons.”

Ahmed, an infertile, American-trained Lebanese Muslim physician, articulates both the sensitivity around male infertility and the acute attention it receives from birth:

“Manhood. It’s really an important factor in society. I know this as a pediatrician. The first thing people ask for at the first baby visit is to check the [male] baby’s reproductive organs. They’re worried from the first moment of life if [the child has] normal reproductive organs. If they will have a normal sexual life. It’s about his future manhood. It’s a strong feeling. And it’s a deficiency if you can’t have children. I do think people feel this. I would assume they do, because it’s a secret kind of thing, male infertility. In my own case, who knows about this [his male infertility problem, involving abnormal sperm morphology]? My wife doesn’t want anyone to know. So we come here [to the IVF clinic] in secrecy.”

Secrecy and male nonresponse create a mutual cult of silence in a marriage and often cause wives to publicly take on the blame of infertility. While some women describe covering up for their husbands with denials, explaining that “the matter is up to God,” or suggesting they are seeking treatment, others fear potential familial and marital consequences of exposing their secrets. However, in Lebanon, where normalization is beginning due to the emergence of modern infertility treatment services like IVF and ICSI, secrecy is not as pertinent of an issue as in other Middle Eastern countries. Unlike in Egypt, for example, where infertility is conflated with emasculation, participants in Lebanon accept male infertility as a medical condition and have even stated in interviews that a man’s infertility has “nothing to do with [his] manhood.” Critical factors contributing to the difference in views across countries include the educational background and financial climate in Lebanon, where educational and literacy rates are higher than in most nations of the region. Satisfaction with professional careers and higher education levels may also offset the negative mental effects of infertility and allow for greater understanding of the issue as a medical one. Additionally, in a nation in the midst of postwar economic recession, men feel pressures of financially supporting their immediate and extended families, so male infertility may seem a trivial concern in an economic climate unfavorable to raising a family.
ADOPTION AND GAMETE DONATION: ALTERNATIVES FOR CHILDLESS MEN IN LEBANON

While adoption and gamete donation are strictly prohibited as solutions to infertility in the Sunni Muslim world, both options are available in Iran and Lebanon, two Middle Eastern countries with significant Shiite populations. Most Muslim men in Lebanon continue to resist both adoption and gamete donation, labeling it an illegitimate form of conceiving a child. However, some have recently adopted these alternatives to family formation in efforts to preserve their marriages, satisfy fatherhood desires, and challenge religious dictates, which they view as obsolete relative to new developments in science and technology.

Parenthood and family formation in Islam are strongly tied to the concept of “purity of lineage.” Islam underlines biological descent and inheritance, meaning the preservation of the child’s relationship to a biological mother and father is imperative. Social parenthood, in the form of adoption or a donor child, in which an orphan takes on the legal name of the adoptive parents and fully integrates into the family with inheritance rights, is essentially unlawful in Islam and not as readily accepted among Muslim-dominant populations as it is in the West. Because adoption deprives the true heirs of inheritance rights, “according to the Qur’an, if a child is not the person’s real child, it cannot become so merely by virtue of a declaration.”

Medical anthropologist Marcia Inhorn has conducted fieldwork to uncover attitudes toward adoption and gamete donation among childless men in Lebanon, as well as to dislodge “tropes of terrorism” of Middle Eastern men. By interviewing more than 200 Lebanese men, she discovered that many were sensitive to their wives’ reproductive health and desires of motherhood and were willing to consider options of adoption and gamete donation. Others even initiated these conversations with their wives as possible solutions.

This serves as evidence that men are challenging religious orthodoxy on these stigmatized topics and taking on pioneering moral stances; acceptance of alternatives to procreation is transforming, and will continue to transform, marital relations among infertile Shiite Muslim couples. This research is vital in understanding the heterogeneity of Muslim men’s religious practices and thinking. Especially in a region that is so poorly understood and oversimplified, rectifying stereotypes that vilify men broadens understandings of the realities of challenges to orthodox practices. As Inhorn expresses, the image that “Muslim men are loving, caring individuals, deeply committed to their marriages, is not ... put forward by the Western media, especially since 9/11. Furthermore, that some Muslim men may be fairly secular, even nonreligious - and hence accepting of scientific technologies and practices that are not condoned by the religion - is an equally obscure image, when compared to those impugning all Muslim men as religious fundamentalism and fanatics.”

Overall it is men’s love and commitment to their marriages that propels the Middle Eastern IVF industry: many choose to opt for socially unpopular solutions of egg or sperm donation and adoption.
to please their wives. Ultimately, the pluralistic culture of Lebanese society has the capacity to liberate diverse approaches to family formation, ease couple’s experiences with infertility, and men’s internal struggles with vulnerability.

CONCLUSION: EVOLVING PERCEPTIONS OF MALE REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Perceived as a non-threatening condition, infertility and its associated mental health impacts are often underestimated and lack proper recognition in the realm of public health. This hidden problem, in reality, affects 10-15% of all married couples in the Middle East and carries massive emotional and psychological burdens. Social implications, especially in developing countries, transform the disease into a pressing health issue once it shifts from an “acute individual private matter to a social publicly stigmatized condition.” Social ramifications including isolation, alienation, marital problems, mental illness and economic hardships are common and experienced by both the infertile individual and their partner. These are caused by sensations of shame and debility, the high costs of infertility treatments, and inability to rely on children as sources for economic survival. These ensuing symptoms are exacerbated in the Middle East where men are equated with their ability to enter fatherhood and procreation is the central function of families. Likewise, the religious rigidity of Islam in respect to definitions of family formation creates further tensions for infertile couples. Though there are unresolved questions and continual stigma surrounding adoption and egg donation in Shi’a populated regions, both egg and sperm donation are occurring and are viewed as “marriage saviors” for couples.

Risk factors in Lebanon are primarily ascribed to environmental exposures of pesticides, heavy metals, and other toxicants and genetic disorders from chromosomal abnormalities through microdeletions on the Y chromosome. The importance of ongoing conflict and familial consanguinity to risks of infertility in Lebanon have not been intensively studied, but current results are significant. Psychological trauma, stress and injury are suggested hazards to reproductive health as odds of war exposure is 1.57 times higher in infertility cases than controls. Though the direct link between consanguinity and infertility requires further analysis, it is confirmed that the offspring of consanguineous marriages express higher rates of homozygous genotypes and are therefore at an increased risk of recessively inherited disorders. Additionally, infertility is known to cluster within families, as supported by evidence that 50% of azoospermic or severely oligospermic men communicate high rates of consanguineous marital patterns.

With sperm counts dropping at alarming rates in the western world, a reported 50 to 60 percent in less than 40 years, research and advancements being made in the Middle East, a region that has been grappling with infertility issues for decades, can be of critical aid. Though the Middle East is rarely held as a model of progressive gender equality in the media, the region has the potential to spread its current movement towards a reframing of infertility as a medical issue, rather than one of manhood.

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