

# INTRODUCTION

## WAR AND TRANSNATIONAL ARAB FAMILIES

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What's war got to do with it? In conversations, consultations, and comparative research since 2001, the authors of the essays in this volume, as well as the other researchers in the Arab Families Working Group (AFWG), have been engaged in an intellectual project to understand how the site of “Arab families”—whether as social institution or social imaginary, or statist project, discourse, trope of modernity, tradition, or in their multiple lived realities—allows new understandings of the conflicts and contradictions besetting the Arab world.

Scholarship in the Arab region has had two underpinning thematic streams of production—academic literature on war and academic literature on Arab families. These streams of knowledge production have rarely interacted, despite the historical and present social domination of war and mobilization for war. Studies on war and conflict have identified the historical and present trajectories of labor and forced migration in a region characterized by the production of internal migrations, transnational families, and other forms of “border crossings”—all of which are highly relevant for understanding families.

Until recently, however, academic literature on Arab families was highly under-theorized and under-problematized. In this context, Elizabeth Thompson's work on the emergence of gender tensions and the remolding of gender pacts in Syria and Lebanon in the wake of World War I and the ensuing colonial struggles is enormously helpful (Thompson 2000). Indeed, a recent historical turn in Arab family

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studies (see Khater 2001; Doumani 2003; Pollard 2005) has accompanied and enriched AFWG's nine-year journey of research. This recent literature situates "family politics," in Pollard's phrase, and changing family relations and dynamics in processes of state-formation, colonial encounters, and economic transformation.

The AFWG project was born out of a double sense of urgency, both intellectual and activist. When regional and international researchers met in Cairo in March 2001 to establish AFWG, Palestine was in the midst of a raging colonial war, Lebanon's fragile emergence from over a quarter of a century of civil war had produced competing visions and on-the-ground conflicts, and Egypt's neo-liberal restructuring simmered with political tensions and social fissures. In the face of these developments and the seemingly perpetual wars and conflicts of the new millennium, re-conceptualizing Arab families and youth in the tumultuous times in which they actually lived seemed crucial. AFWG researchers, while working in gender studies, worried that mainstream gender analyses in the region largely conceived of "family" in opposition to an individualized woman subject struggling to assert her rights against family suppression. AFWG aimed, as Joseph and Rieker note in the "Introduction" to AFWG's first edited volume (submitted), to put "family and gender in dialogue." Scholars and researchers based in the region were also greatly frustrated by a lack of support for the theoretical production, circulation, and debate of ideas. Often "assigned," in the global division of intellectual labor, to being short-term policy researchers, scholars in the region were seen as burdened with worn-out conceptual frameworks.

The Arab Families Working Group organized itself as a network of fifteen scholars committed to collaborative, comparative, interdisciplinary research on families and youth in Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, and their diasporas in the United States and Canada. Since 2001, AFWG has met at least twice annually to collectively develop our research program of rethinking Arab families.<sup>1</sup> We initially organized ourselves into three research projects (public discourse, families, and youth; families and border crossings; and families and well-being) until we developed our thirteen empirical research projects. The seven articles in this volume represent the work of eight of the Core Group members (Abu Nahleh, Johnson, Joseph, Jureidini, Khalaf, Makhoul, Moors, Naber), one col-

laborative partner (Jad), and one co-researcher (Ghanem). Members of the AFWG Core Group whose project findings are being published elsewhere are Ibrahim El Nur, Hoda Elsadda, Omnia El Shakry, Barbara Ibrahim, Eileen Kuttab, Martina Rieker, and Zeina Zaatari. As the fifteen researchers developed the thirteen research projects (three worked on one project), two major thematics emerged: one on war, violence, migration, and families, and the other on violence, displacement, migration, and youth.

In the first thematic, projects represented here focused on the politics of marriage under conditions of war and violence in Palestine; postwar, urban, poor, displaced Lebanese families in Beirut; domestic service in Lebanon; female-headed households in the aftermath of male head-of-household migration; citizenship and national identity among transnational families moving between Lebanon and the United States and Canada; and family and reactions to violence in the Middle East among Arab diasporic families in Dearborn, Michigan. Along with a project on displaced Sudanese elites (in progress), these projects focused on the impact of violent disruptions on family class positions, household heads' decision-making, marriage and family formation, familial political identities, and family economies in multiple sites.

The other Core Group members launched research investigations on the impact of war, violence, displacement, and migration on youth in Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine. Their research projects focused on a historical analysis of the category of "youth" in the Arab world; the development of the ideas of civic service and charitable giving among youth leaders in Egypt; the construction of imaginaries of desire among Palestinian youth; the impact of competing Lebanese national television channels targeting youth in the aftermath of the civil war; the construction of the "girl child" as a problem space in modern state-building projects in Egypt; and the shifting literary grounds on which progressive Egyptian writers represent the nation and the place of youth in the national imaginary.

The articles published here are situated in Lebanon (Makhoul and Ghanem, Jureidini, Khalaf), Palestine (Johnson, Abu Nahleh, and Moors, Jad), and transnational diasporas (Joseph, Naber). They draw on diverse and extensive literatures and theorizations to which we can only point in this introduction. However, as an illustration, a brief review of

the literature on Palestine is telling for our project and this special issue. Family (and gender) studies in Palestine have followed their subjects, ruptured and re-constituted by and through war. For example, issues raised in the foundational work of Hilma Granqvist (1931–35) in Artas, a village in the southern West Bank in the 1920s, were perhaps only taken up again by Palestinian scholars in the 1980s. During that period, both a new interest in Palestinian women, fuelled by women's role in the national resistance, and a revivalist interest in Palestinian "folk" traditions, inspired scholars to explore Palestinian family life and to probe women's public and domestic activities. Despite this renewed interest, the lack of a continuous tradition of scholarly work on Palestinian families, particularly after 1948, is striking.

However, even if we restrict ourselves here to literature on the West Bank and Gaza that links Palestinian families and war and conflict, there are at least three important exceptions that offer insights into Palestinian families in the context of sustained colonial conflict: First, research on Palestinian women and gender relations has opened a theoretical window on the interaction of domestic and public life, including war, resistance, and conflict (e.g., Jad 1990; Peteet 1997). Second, research on the social and economic consequences of the prolonged Israeli military occupation has posited major changes in Palestinian family dynamics: an example is how the shift away from subsistence agriculture in the West Bank toward male waged work in Israel transformed productive daughters into "dependent wives," according to Moors (1995); in Gaza, the shift to work in Israel led to greater "housewivization," according to a case study of Shatti refugee camp (Lang and Mohanna 1992). Third and more recently, policy research, often expressed in the form of international agency reports, focuses on the impact of conflict on households and communities (e.g., Oxfam International 2002). In these studies, however, implications for medium- or long-term social change are rarely articulated. Gender-informed scholarship on Palestinian families over the last decade has broken new ground, for example, in exploring questions of social reproduction as families strategize for survival and mobility in contemporary Palestine (Taraki 2006); in bringing together educational and labor transformations of women with resistance and the political imprisonment of men in an in-depth study of families in a West Bank refugee camp (Rosenfeld 2004); and in illuminating the

entangling of reproductive decisions in projects of modernity, reactions to colonialism, and assertions of national and self identity among Palestinian women in the Galilee (Kanaaneh 2002). Finally, the body of work produced and being produced by Rosemary Sayigh in Lebanon remains an inspiration (e.g., Sayigh 2002).

The two contributions on Palestine (Johnson, Abu Nahleh, and Moors, Jad) in this volume are part of an ongoing AFWG project on “Weddings and Wars, Marriages and Movements.” Starting from marriage as a crucial moment in the production of families, this project focuses on the cultural politics and cultural economies of transformation (as well as continuities) in marriage arrangements and wedding celebrations in Palestine under protracted war-like conditions. Johnson, Abu Nahleh, and Moors are concerned with a comparison between such arrangements and celebrations in the two Palestinian intifadas, focusing first on political marriages, where political affiliation is a salient factor in marriageability and choice of partner. Secondly, they focus on the wider politics of marriage, as the culture of austerity and weddings “in silence” in the first intifada are compared to the public displays of consumption in the second. Jad looks at an important phenomenon—collective weddings—that responds to the increased material requirements of marriage by offering an avenue to reduce expenses—often through the auspices of a political faction. Thus, Jad examines contending Islamist and nationalist interpretations of the collective, or group, wedding.

These two empirical research projects have produced a diverse but pervasive set of examples of how both political crisis and colonial oppression contribute to changing the cultural politics of marriage. In the current intifada, these examples range from the effects of an Israeli invasion of a wedding hall on a previously apolitical bride, to the communal effects of the Israeli siege on the economies of marriage. They also range from debates over proper and improper marriage and where to “put the brides” in a collective ceremony, to young men from the *tanzim* (literally “organization,” referring to Fateh militant youth) ineptly trying to save a marriage.

Interestingly, both articles show how post-Oslo globalized realities shape contemporary marriage arrangements, affiliations, and self-presentation, including in collective weddings. Comparing these weddings to those delineated in the first intifada where, as one bride says, “the in-

tifada took all our minds,” one is struck by differential effects of war. In the first intifada, resistance against Israeli occupation—and hope for the Palestinian national project—produces internal transformations, while in the second intifada, war seems to be an externalized—if ceaseless and dangerous—threat to marriage arrangements and wedding ceremonies as a normative practice of ordinary life.

Both Ray Jureidini’s oral history of domestic service in Lebanon and Jihad Makhoul and Mary Ghanem’s work on contemporary displaced families living on the margins of Beirut show family transformations in the shadow of war—and in different ways, in the presence of strangers. Makhoul and Ghanem illustrate, for example, how the unfamiliar presence of strangers (foreign workers) in the displaced neighborhoods of Beirut reconfigures domestic space and the mobility of women and girls, as women no longer feel free to use their balconies to sit or to hang up their laundry. Multiple moves and disassociation from wider kin networks intensify the feeling of a life that is not familial, not familiar. As one woman says, “We never felt comfortable in any house we moved to.... We fear whoever knocks at our door.” Residence without the required legal documents, irregular male employment, and inability to meet children’s health and educational needs add to the tension that mothers in particular feel, where “your head won’t stop.” Makhoul and Ghanem’s qualitative interviews and integrated public health perspective bring home the effects of these multiple moves—the long-term effect of war and displacement—as women struggle against ever poorer housing conditions and alleviate tension through tranquilizers or prayer.

When a domestic worker steps over the threshold, Jureidini remarks, the family is faced with a stranger in the house, one who is “close but distant, familiar but unknown.” While clearly acknowledging the unequal and sometimes exploitative relations of patronage and dependency, in this study, based on interviews with employers, Jureidini is particularly interested in perceptions and practices of domestic workers as fictive kin. Maids are perceived as adopted daughters, in the case of the child maids who were predominant up until the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war (1975) and who were “raised like my own children,” in the words of one employer. The sometimes contested role of the maid as stand-in mother is also explored. Of particular interest for our theme,

the Lebanese civil war stands as a “watershed” in this history, as employing families shifted radically from Arab to non-Arab migrant labor: Palestinian maids, for example, whether empowered by the Palestinian resistance to claim rights or simply perceived as the same, were suddenly considered dangerous and disruptive, while employers also viewed Lebanese maids from other sects as suspicious. Jureidini questions how the new commodified (and globalized) relations with foreign migrant labor—primarily from Sri Lanka and the Philippines—might compare with the older “feudal” ties. While abuse and exploitation exist in both cases, the creation of a “gendered and racialized transnational labor force” crossing the threshold produces new dynamics and formations in Lebanese families.

The remaining three articles all focus on Lebanese families who cross borders permanently or temporarily. Khalaf examines the emigration of the male head of household and the impact of his departure on decision-making and well-being within the family that remains in Lebanon. Surveying a sample of 107 households from a national survey covering 18,234 households, Khalaf assesses the impact of the length of the husband’s absence, the level of the husband’s education, the level of his income, and the level of the wife’s education. She finds that the wife takes the majority of decisions when the husband leaves. The wife increasingly moves into the public domain, dealing with public institutions to take care of family business. The couples seem to maintain a division of labor with regard to the children, with the wife being in charge of their education and the husband playing a significant role in their marriage and employment. However, the longer the absence of the husband, Khalaf finds, the more likely the couple will be to take these decisions jointly.

Joseph studies a different sort of migration—that of entire families who migrated together from Lebanon to North America. While she finds the umbrella paradigm of “transnational families” quite useful in naming some of the dynamics she observes, she also finds that these families unsettle some of the assumptions often found in the literature on transnational families. Her site is an ethnographically grounded study of five families, most of whom she has been working with since 1994 as part of a study that included over 100 informants from a Christian village in Lebanon. Her (pre-AFWG) research project was a

longitudinal study of the socialization of children for citizenship in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war. The families covered in this paper all moved to Canada and the United States in the past decade. For her AFWG project, Joseph followed these families to Ottawa and Montreal, and New Brunswick, New Jersey. The families, Joseph argues, can better be understood as familial networks that crystallize into different relational formations under different conditions. The transnational context, she finds, facilitated rather than fractured nuclearity. She found that it was the women who agitated for migration and often the men who were nostalgic for Lebanon. These women exhibited less of a sense of identification with Lebanon than did the men.

Engaging with the notion of transnationalism from another site, Naber is concerned with how violence in the Middle East affects the diaspora in the United States. Working with Lebanese families in Dearborn, Michigan, during and after Israel's 2006 war on Lebanon, Naber argues that family is a critical site for refracting the war on Lebanon. For these families, Naber argues, the siege of Lebanon configured the family as the "Arab family," a broad community that shared the experience of the state of siege in the homeland. In the crisis, families in Dearborn intensified their relationships with their families in Lebanon. The war also led to a reconceptualization of their sense of belonging to an American family. Most interestingly, Naber examines the gendered implications of war experienced at a distance.

One of AFWG's aims is to situate its project in the "historical present," to use Joseph and Rieker's phrase, where "families are grounded in the past and in the coming future."<sup>2</sup> The historical and present realities of war, conflict, and violence constitute the ground on which these Arab families live and on which they construct familial relations and imagine their futures. The empirical research reflected in the seven articles in this special issue of *JMEWS* suggests ways of bringing the literature on Arab families and the literature on war and conflict into conversation with each other. Toward this end, we find Rosemary Sayigh's notion of conceiving "family" as a response to crisis, highly productive (Sayigh 2007). It has allowed for an understanding of "'the family' as constantly invented and reinvented in the context of failed states and failed modernism" (Joseph and Rieker, submitted).



## NOTES

1. AFWG has been funded by the International Development Research Center (Cairo and Ottawa), the Ford Foundation (Cairo), the Population Council (Cairo), UNICEF (Cairo), the University of California, Davis, the American University in Cairo, and AUC's Social Research Center. AFWG is co-housed at the University of California, Davis, and the American University in Cairo. AFWG was founded in 2001 by Suad Joseph. The fifteen Core Group members of AFWG are Lamis Abu Nahleh, Ibrahim El Nur, Hoda Elsadda, Omnia El Shakry, Barbara Ibrahim, Suad Joseph, Penny Johnson, Ray Jureidini, Mona Khalaf, Eileen Kuttab, Jihad Makhoul, Annelies Moors, Nadine Naber, Martina Rieker, and Zeina Zaatari. For more information about AFWG, see <http://www.afwg.info/>.

2. AFWG is continually reshaping its theoretical work in response to the findings of its empirical research projects. These empirical projects as well as the projects of the remaining seven members of AFWG, developed and discussed in finer detail, are the basis for AFWG's second volume currently in progress.

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