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**PATHS OF RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITLE: The Paradigm of Resistance: Tracking the Course of the Left in the Middle East and North Africa**

**CONVENOR(S):** - Daniela Melfa;  
- Francesco Saverio Leopardi.

**ABSTRACT:**

The theme of resistance represents an effective paradigm to study the trajectories of leftist movement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The “need” to resist marked the conduct of forces from the whole leftist spectrum. Resistance to colonial powers was high on the Left’s agenda, prompting collaboration with ideologically different organizations. After the establishment of post-colonial regimes, leftist organizations experienced conflict with the authorities but often also collaboration and compromise with them. Resistance entailed efforts to retain ideological consistency, organizational integrity and survival to government crackdown. The MENA Left, notably Communist, struggled with problematic Soviet interventions responding to Cold War logic. Since the late 1970s, leftist movements both resisted and compromised with Islamist forces and with the neoliberal paradigm supported by the nationalist-military elites. Resistance to the demise of global socialism represented the ultimate challenge whose consequences are still felt today. This panel aims to investigate how the paradigm of resistance shaped the trajectories of the MENA Left by looking at single cases both theoretically and empirically. What conceptual tools can we use to study leftist resistance politics in the MENA? Are concepts derived from the observation of power relations in Western societies (e.g. Foucault) relevant for the MENA? How did Marxist factions elaborate their concept of resistance and how did they implement it? How did leftist movements face Marxist-inspired competitors and Islamist organizations? Ultimately, this discussion aims to analyze the reasons behind the current marginalization of leftist forces, namely one of the factors contributing to dysfunctional polities throughout the region.

**CONVENOR’S ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

Daniela Melfa is Associate Professor of African History at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Catania. Her work-in-progress concerns the trajectory of the Left in independent Tunisia. She is the incumbent president of the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies.

Francesco Saverio Leopardi is Research Fellow at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna. During his PhD (University of Edinburgh), he worked on the contemporary history of the Palestinian Left. He currently participates in the research project "The Making of the Washington Consensus. Negotiating international assets, debts and power (1979-91)" (MIUR, Prin 2015) focusing on the case of Algeria.

## **PAPERS:**

### **1. Transnational Discourses and Organizational Similarities between Turkey's PKK and Mexico's EZLN Peasant Rebellions in Comparative Perspective.**

**Juan Carlos Castillo**

#### **ABSTRACT:**

This paper aims to explore the discursive connections of two local insurgencies in the Global South: the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Mexico. We argue that both cases offer the opportunity to examine the discursive and organizational similarities of indigenous armed movements of two distant geographies. For this purpose, we examine how these armed movements have framed their revolutionary and emancipatory discourses. We analyse their ideological repertoires (frames and framing activity) to compare grievances and strategies for collective action. The study uses the globalization literature, in general, and the transnational social movement literature, in particular, to compare mobilization speech acts in the pro-Kurdish leadership of the PKK and the pro-Mayan leadership of the EZLN. We argue that the emergence and development of these peasant insurgencies need to be reconsidered in light of the growing capitalist penetration and homogenizing nation-building process, in both Chiapas region in Mexico and Turkey's southeast. We end with a discussion of how the similarities in their agendas and means for mobilization have not been equally received in the international arena and what does it mean for the success of their demands for "social justice".

#### **ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

**Juan Carlos Castillo** is PhD Candidate in Political and Social Sciences at the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM). Associate professor of African and Middle East History at the Department of International Relations, UNAM. His work-in-progress concerns the construction of security discourses and the role of non-State actors in the Middle East. He currently participates in the research project "Sectarianism and Social Justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Middle East" analysing the Kurdish case.

### **2. NEW-LEFT EXPERIMENTS IN 1960s-1970s LEBANON AND RESISTANCE TODAY**

**LAURE GUIRGUIS**

#### **ABSTRACT**

What perhaps best characterizes the revolutionary period of the 1960s-70s lies in the junction, at a global scale, between contesting social norms and challenging a political and economic system of domination. Militants of the New Left in Lebanon have attempted, as their "comrades" worldwide, to organize the struggle in these different and interlinked realms. Beginning with 1968, strikes broke out within all sectors, fueling a massive rush to left-wing militant groups, while the Karameh battle (March 1968) had provided a new, heroic, representation of the Palestinian fighter. Militants of the left-wing group Socialist Lebanon (SL, 1966-1971) observed that the sympathy expressed toward the Palestinian resistance seemed to be deep and massive enough to give reason to hope for possibly overwhelming the

multifarious divisions and allegiances within Lebanese society, which had until then impeded the development of trade-unionism and social mobilizations.

Drawing on a few episodes of social and political resistance in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Lebanon, this presentation is aimed at clarifying the political and theoretical challenges of writing a critical history of the Arab New Left. This paper relies on militant newspapers and analytical texts, and on interviews with former militants carried out between 2016 and 2019.

#### **ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

Thyssen Junior Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Central European University, Budapest

Last publications

“La référence au Vietnam et l'émergence des gauches radicales au Liban, 1956-1979,” *Monde (s)* 14 (2) 2018.

*Copts and the Security State. Violence, Coercion, and Sectarianism in Contemporary Egypt*, Stanford UP, 2016

### **3. Fighting for Islamic Legitimacy: The Soviet Union, the People Democratic Party of Afghanistan, and the ‘Muslim World’, 1978-1988**

**Vassily Klimentov**

#### **ABSTRACT:**

The Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in December 1979 to support the People Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), its ally who faced a popular revolt spurred by its own radical Marxist and atheist policies. Until its withdrawal in February 1989, the Soviet Union ended up fighting a fragmented insurgency tied together in the name of the ‘defence of Islam’. At an international level, the Soviet-Afghan War transformed into a proxy conflict where the US and a series of Muslim countries supported the insurgents. Yet, the PDPA and the Soviet Union never abandoned their attempts to contest the mantle of Islamic legitimacy to the insurgents – the Mujahideen. Throughout the war, Moscow and Kabul tried to convince the ‘Muslim world’ that they too had now become respectful of Islam.

This article analyses the PDPA’s attempt to present itself, with Moscow’s support, as truly Muslim in international Islamic forums and to build ties with various countries in the Middle East and North Africa in the 1980s. It shows how the Afghan communists despite their newfound respect for Islam, their pro-communist Islamic clergy, and Soviet backing struggled to get accepted by other Muslim countries. In the end, the PDPA’s Islamic diplomacy ended up being limited to majority Muslim countries supported by the USSR, and opposition leftist movements. In terms of Islamic diplomacy, as in other matters, the Afghan communists were bound by the context of the Cold War.

#### **ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

**Vassily Klimentov** is a PhD candidate in International History and International Relations at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. He is also a Teaching Assistant in International Affairs at the Graduate Institute. Vassily Klimentov holds a MA in General History and a MA in Asian Studies from the Graduate Institute and the University of Geneva.

#### 4. "Tin shacks and dreams": mizrahi 'intellectual resistance' in Israel, 1950s-1980s / "Baracche di lamiera e sogni": resistenze intellettuali mizrahi e politica israeliana, ca. 1950-1980

Dario Miccoli

##### ABSTRACT:

Sin dalle prime *aliyot* (migrazioni) di *mizrahim* (ebrei del Medio Oriente e Nord Africa) verso Israele negli anni Quaranta e Cinquanta, questi ultimi hanno preso parte in molti modi alla vita intellettuale e politica israeliana, sia da posizioni *mainstream* e che si rifanno al modello nazionale sionista che in prospettive alternative o talora contrarie ad esso. Questo *paper* vorrebbe soffermarsi sulla prima fase del radicalismo intellettuale e politico *mizrahi*, partendo dalle proteste di Wadi Salib (1959), passando per l'emergere della *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* (letteratura del campo di transito) degli anni Sessanta di scrittori ebrei iracheni come Shimon Ballas e Sami Michael, fino alla fondazione di movimenti sociali e politici come *Ha-panterim ha-shehorim* (Pantere Nere) negli anni Settanta, per arrivare infine alla 'svolta conservatrice' degli anni Ottanta con la nascita di *Shas* (1984). Attraverso il ricorso a fonti di natura archivistica, letteraria e autobiografica, si mostrerà come intellettuali e attivisti israeliani di origine *mizrahi* abbiano portato le loro istanze sulla scena pubblica, contrastando le politiche dominanti e proponendo alternative che di volta in volta guardavano alla società palestinese, come anche a modelli della sinistra globale (dal comunismo al terzomondismo) od ancora alla tradizione sefardita. In tal modo, l'identità *mizrahi* emergerà quale *lieu de savoir*, attorno al quale è stato ed è possibile ridiscutere la storia degli ebrei dei paesi arabi e nel quale contrastanti memorie e aspettative si intrecciano alla società israeliana nel suo complesso.

**Dario Miccoli** è ricercatore di Lingua e Letteratura Ebraica al Dipartimento di Studi sull'Asia e sull'Africa Mediterranea, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. E' autore di due monografie - *Histories of the Jews of Egypt: An Imagined Bourgeoisie, 1880s-1950s* (2015) e *La letteratura israeliana mizrahi* (2016) - tre curatele, nonché di articoli di rivista e capitoli di libro. Le sue ricerche si concentrano sulla storia culturale degli ebrei dei paesi arabi, in particolare l'Egitto, nel Novecento e sulla letteratura israeliana contemporanea.

#### 5. A HISTORY OF STRUGGLE: FEMINISM AND LEFTIST NATIONALISM WITHIN THE WESTERN SAHARA'S POLISARIO MOVEMENT

Ewa K. Strzelecka

##### ABSTRACT:

Since 1975, the territory of the Western Sahara has been the subject of a long-running dispute and conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front liberation movement, which claims the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination and an independent state. In 1976, the Polisario Front proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), with the government-in-exile based in the refugee camps of Tindouf, Algeria. The Polisario anti-colonial liberation movement represents leftist nationalism which has been based upon social equality, popular sovereignty and people's self-determination. Women's emancipation became a central issue of the liberation movement and a significant symbol of modernity.

Polisario reforms attempted to create a new woman, *educated* mothers and productive citizens who would be willing to take a public political stand. This discussion aims to analyse the leftist resistance politics of the Polisario from gender perspective. In particular, it focuses on gender dynamics within the Polisario state-movement to analyse how women actively engage in anti-colonial struggles and how they renegotiate their gender positions and roles within the contexts of nation- and proto-state building in exile, and socio-political change. Attention is paid to the mechanisms of power involved and the dialectical interactions between social structures and women's agency, and the dynamic processes of women's participation in the Sahrawi nationalist ideology and politics.

#### ACADEMIC PROFILE:

**Ewa K. Strzelecka** is a postdoctoral scholar at the Centre for Research in Anthropology, Nova University of Lisbon, within the CAPSAHARA project. She holds a PhD in Social and Political Science from the University of Granada. Her research is mainly focused on gender and the complexity of social and political change in the Middle East and North Africa.

## 6. Global Movement for (Radical) Democracy: The PKK and Subaltern Internationalism

Yasin Sunca, Tobias Reinhardt,

#### ABSTRACT:

This paper aspires to explicate why and how the PKK aims at mobilising a global movement for (radical) democracy. Initiated as a Marxist-Leninist national liberation movement in the revolutionary period of 60s and 70s in Turkey, the PKK has transformed into a proclaimed radical democratic movement from early 2000 on as a response to the insurmountable structural dynamics in upper Mesopotamia and their analysis from a perspective heavily informed by the post-Marxian revolutionary literature. Building on the PKK's historical internationalist praxis, this attempt goes beyond the relatively simplistic intellectual and analytical binary positioning of particularism versus universalism. The PKK is establishing relations with different (revolutionary) parties, movements and individuals globally and gradually developing a dynamic network of activists based on the idea of radical democracy and its realising praxis in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan). We argue that such an attempt can be explained ideologically, through the *impossibility of the realisation of democratic confederalism* in Western Asian conditions *without a globally mobilised subaltern internationalism*. We develop the argument by understanding the transformation of the PKK and its transformed understanding of the 'solution to the Kurdish question', which makes sense only if revolutionary agency is defined beyond historically embedded spatial (West versus East or North versus South), temporal (regressive versus progressive), and social (bourgeoisie versus proletariat) binaries.

## **ACADEMIC PROFILES:**

Yasin Sunca, PhD Candidate  
Bielefeld University, RTG World Politics  
Ghent University, MENARG – Middle East and North Africa Research Group

Tobias Reinhardt, PhD Candidate  
Scuola Normale Superiore – Istituto di Scienze Umane e Sociali (SNS)

## **7. REMEMBERING THE "CHE GUEVARA OF THE MIDDLE EAST": KHALID AHMAD ZAKI AND THE VICISSITUDES OF LEFT-WING MELANCHOLIA**

**PHILIPP WINKLER**

### **ABSTRACT:**

After the Iraqi Communist Party had decided to collaborate with the self-proclaimed "Arab Socialist" Aref Regime in 1964, a cooperation urged by the Soviet Union for strategic reasons, a defiant trend arose within the party that resisted what it saw as an unacceptable and fatal political strategy forced upon it by autocratic party cadres and a paternalistic USSR.

Eventually, in May 1968, a young communist firebrand named Khalid Ahmad Zaki and his supporters, inspired by the Vietnamese and Cuban models, broke away from the Party and took up arms to start a rebellion against the Aref Regime, only to be crushed within a few weeks. Shortly afterwards, the Bath established its long-lasting terror regime.

However insignificant his actions may have turned out to be within the greater picture of history, Zaki's memory lived on in the minds of the Arab Left, far beyond the borders of Iraq, as he turned into a symbol of resistance and defiance towards the prevalent non-revolutionary trend among Communists to collaborate with existing regimes, known as the "Che Guevara of the Middle East".

This paper will analyze the role Zaki played in the collective memory of the Arab Left by tracing his appearances in paintings, poems, films, novels and memoirs from different periods. Following Enzo Traverso's explication of the concept of Left-Wing Melancholia, it shows that while remembering him initially served the purpose of inciting further actions in his spirit, later commemorations portray him as a symbol of a bygone hope that never materialized.

### **ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

I obtained an MA in History from Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany (FAU) in 2015 and spent April-July 2016 at the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies, Beirut. Currently I am teaching at FAU and writing my Dissertation (Title: "The Arab Left and its Reception of the Vietnamese and Cuban Experiences after 1967")