Introduction

It is with great pleasure that I introduce this issue of MELG; while it is not a 'special issue', it is, indeed, special. MELG has a tradition of publishing a Field Note each year; this issue houses five timely notes from the field each reflecting on Lebanon's 2019 uprising and the August 2020 port explosion. Written from different disciplinary perspectives – sociology, anthropology, political science and the study of religion – the five short articles provide personal and thought-provoking insights into the revolutionary experience, the causes of the revolutions, the impact of the pandemic which was followed by the horrific port explosion, and where the authors feel we need to go from here.

The issue begins with two research articles. In the first, "On Their Own?: Women Running as Independent Candidates in the Middle East," Welborne questions why so many female independent candidates have been successful in elections – indeed, the MENA region leads the world in terms of the countries that have female members of parliament. Examining the cases of Jordan, Egypt and Oman, Welborne points to the unintended consequences of mixed and plurality systems in conjunction with gender quotas. This conjunction has bred a kind of personality politics which allows for women to enter politics often via informal institutions. In this manner, Welborne demonstrates, women are able to gain access to heretofore closed-off political spaces.

Welborne's study is followed by El Kurd's examination of the impact of American involvement on national liberation movements. Looking specifically at the Palestinian national liberation movement in the Palestinian territories and the Kurdish national liberation movement in Iraqi Kurdistan, El Kurd argues that international involvement has had detrimental effects on the efficacy and coherence of both movements. It furthermore has created authoritarian dynamics in the respective state-building projects by polarizing elites and creating a divergence between elite preferences and public preferences.

The issue's 'extended' 'Field Notes' section begins with Majed's personal reflection on the double liminality of living through a revolution, financial collapse and pandemic. Majed examines the moment of the revolution and the multitude of possibilities and imaginaries it created, contrasting the 'dream' of the revolution with the 'nightmare' of the pandemic which forced protestors to stay at home and allowed ruling elites to reassert their power by repositioning themselves through their clientelist networks. Referring to the liminality of the

uprising and the liminality of the pandemic – two very different experiences of “in-betweenness” – Majed questions what happens when a pandemic hits in the context of an already liminal state? How does double-liminality unfold?

El Helou takes an ethnographic lens to one moment in time in the revolution: New Year's Eve. Like Majed, el Helou shares with the reader the awe and exhilaration she experienced as she joined people of all walks of life descending upon downtown Beirut and claiming the exclusionary, gentrified, expensive and highly policed space for themselves. El Helou's reflection explores how the temporality of the revolution was unique in its ability to appropriate new meanings to public spaces that were not accessible to all strata of the public before.

However, as Halawi and Salloukh state, imagining is one thing while real political change is another. In this vein, the two authors question what is needed for the latter. While ‘leaderless’, ‘decentralized’ and ‘non-hierarchical’ were the buzzwords of the protests, Halawi and Salloukh argue that a cross-sectarian and cross-regional *political* organization was needed to convert the demands for political change to actual political change. The authors examine how the October 2019 protestors, worried about ideological compromise and organizational infighting, and cautious of being penetrated and coopted by sectarian political elites, refused to create political organizations or a broad coalition around a common programme. Yet, Halawi and Salloukh argue, the lack of a political organization meant that protestors became disillusioned with the efficacy of protesting and slowly stopped attending protests. The protests were then given a ‘double knock-out blow’ with the outbreak of COVID-19, followed by the August 2020 explosion.

Salomon takes a different direction in his reflection. Whereas Halawi/Salloukh and Geha/Kanaan/Saliba (see below) question the role that organizations can play in dismantling its sectarian system and are essentially concerned with the fate of the state itself, Salomon explores the other side of the equation: what happens to those religious groups whose current status is inextricably intertwined with the religious imagining of the state when a challenge to that state is put forward? In other words, what happens to state-ified religion? Based on an analysis of the revolutions in Sudan and Lebanon, Salomon examines the discourse of two religious movements that are intricately entangled with the state as they negotiate popular demands to rethink that state. In Lebanon, he explores how Shi'a activists negotiated the commitment to the Shi'i historical legacy of standing up to power and oppression, the reading of that legacy with an insistence that the struggle in the present is one that is global in nature and thus must sometimes sacrifice local goods for a larger concept of justice (*al-muqawama*), and thirdly, the demands of the October 17,

2019 revolution that resonated with the Lebanese people across the religious and political spectrum.

Geha, Kanaan and Saliba conclude this special Field Notes section with an examination of the August 2020 explosion and call for resistance, not resilience, as a way forward. As scholar-activists, the three authors detail how they created Khaddit Beirut (lit. “Beirut shook up” or, “the shaking up of Beirut”) the day after the explosion and its mission, inspired by lessons from South Africa, to bring about political change in Lebanon. It is a call for action and a reminder that the role of professors in academia is political.

Janine A. Clark

Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Toronto at
Mississauga

Editor in Chief of *Middle East Law and Governance*