Introduction
Towards a New Sociology of Icons in the Middle East

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The presence of iconic figures in the context of Middle Eastern political life is well-known. As in other parts of the world, influential persons and their biographies often grab the public imagination. This is noticeable through the presence of innumerable charismatic leaders from Egyptian president and pan-Arabist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser to present-day Islamic leaders like Hassan Nasrallah (Matar, Khatib and Alshaer 2014), ‘media personalities’ like Amr Khaled and ‘state cult figures’ like Atatürk and Hafez al-Asad, whose very persons were—and continue to be—associated with the modern nation state (Özyürek 2006; Wedeen 1999). Although their personal biographies are interesting, such iconic figures should not be studied in isolation but in the interplay between mass mediations, ideological, and affective politics. In order to do so we must first emphasize that the study of iconic figures is the study of a particular social technique for the generation of politics, as well as for the production of the political in itself. As is the case around the world (Ghosh 2011; cf. Hopgood 2005), in the Middle East iconic figures form a pivotal point in the production of various kinds of mass-mediated publics (Warner 2002; cf. Bandak and Bille 2013). They spark debate, inspire deep emotions and attachment to cultural and political projects, generate collective aspirations and set people and ideas in motion. In this process, the contours of the political field are crafted as part of persuading persons to move with a collective in a given direction (Amin and Thrift 2013). This latter insight is well-known, and the relationship of icon to the political has been explored at length in sociology and anthropology through prominent analytical concepts like idolatry, fetishism, iconoclasm and dialectical images that all somehow assume that
icons and the configuration of the political are mutually constituted (Mitchell 1987).

The prominence of the iconic figure as a social technique for the production of the political is closely linked to the continuous development of various mass-mediating techniques. Mass-produced commodities as well as different kinds of mass-media facilitate the wide accessibility and circulation that allow many to forge affective ties to an iconic figure. In her study of the contemporary use and circulation of the icon of Atatürk in Turkey, Esra Özyürek (2006) thus shows how the intensified mobilization of Atatürk in the context of political struggles between so-called secularists and pro-Islamists is closely intertwined with the diffusion of a neoliberal consumer economy. Paraphernalia such as miniature emblems, pins and other material objects featuring Atatürk’s image form a central part of the way in which this particular kind of nostalgia for the modern is structured (see also Haugbolle 2013). In that sense the affect generated through consumption lingers on in the relationship people forge with iconic figures by way of material objects. These affective ties must be maintained, however. One of the great questions surrounding the studies of icons is exactly how structures of feeling are produced and reproduced as political institutions, mass media and the machineries of local, national and global consumption grind out old stories and images, reinvent and change some, and leave others to oblivion. How are power relations reconfigured through affective shifts, and do political actors consciously manipulate important icons, or are they rather subject to particular social forces?

Indeed, the histories and historical experiences that the various people who relate to an iconic figure associate with it and reproduce through it are a key aspect of the production of affect by way of the icon. The iconic figure is also in itself a material object that retains memories of a specific political history, which moves those who have knowledge about the context of the object (following Navaro-Yashin 2012). This insight underlines the need to dwell on the biographical and socio-historical contextual details of the person-as-icon, in order to explore the power of particular icons to move those who evoke it. What kinds of biographies and histories do those who evoke an iconic figure mobilize to relay its power? When we stress this already well-known and perhaps evident point, it is in order to emphasize that we, unlike Michael Herzfeld, do not see a need to move away from the everyday use of the notion of icon in anthropology as ‘emblem’, i.e., ‘a person who is seen to embody the ideal traits of a faddish cultural ideology’ (2005: 93–94). Herzfeld introduces the term ‘iconicity’ in his work on cultural intimacy (2005) in order to grasp the relation between icon and the political. Herzfeld pursues the role of icons by pointing to the ‘totalizing iconicity’ that is an integral part of the nation-state ideology, and which works