From peaceful civil movement to civil war and sectarian polarization: A critical review of Kevin Mazur's *Revolution in Syria: Identity, Networks, and Repression*

Housamedden Darwish

Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany

Abstract

This critical review delves into Kevin Mazur's latest publication, *Revolution in Syria: Identity, Networks, and Repression* (2021), which scrutinizes the transformation of a peaceful civil movement into a civil war characterized by ethnic divisions. The review offers a comprehensive assessment of Mazur's approach to answering the pivotal question: How did the Syrian conflict evolve along ethnic lines? Spanning 306 pages, the book's central premise revolves around the notion that the Syrian uprising's evolution into an ethnicized conflict can be attributed to a confluence of factors, with the predominant catalyst being the ethnically exclusive nature of the incumbent political regime. Of particular interest in this review is the emphasis on the sectarian or ethnic perspective – a prominent lens used to analyse the political and societal landscapes of the Islamicate Arab world. Mazur's ethno-sectarian perspective, commendably, avoids succumbing to primordial essentialism. However, this review contends that a critical appraisal is warranted regarding Mazur's conceptualization of Syrians' identities solely through religious, ethnic, or sectarian affiliations. Similarly, the presumption that these affiliations inherently explain attitudes towards both the ruling regime and the uprising against it raises valid concerns. One notable critique lies in the characterization of Syrians within Mazur's narrative. Strikingly, absent are depictions of Syrians as a unified populace, individual actors or civic entities. This stems from the book's classification framework, which hinges on two primary criteria: an ethnic-sectarian criterion and a local or regional one. This duality, while serving analytical purposes, potentially undermines the complexity and diversity inherent within Syrian society. In conclusion, this review acknowledges the significant contributions of Mazur's book, recognizing its role in shedding light on the ethnicized trajectory of the Syrian conflict. Nonetheless, it urges cautious contemplation of the assumptions underpinning the ethnic-sectarian perspective. The book's dual classification approach warrants critical consideration for its potential to oversimplify the multifaceted nature

Corresponding author:
Housamedden Darwish, Leipzig University, Ritter street 26, Leipzig, 04109, Germany.
Email: housamdarwish@gmail.com

of Syrian identities. Thus, while appreciating the book's value, this review underscores the need to acknowledge its limitations in fostering a comprehensive understanding of the Syrian conflict's intricate dynamics.

Keywords
Syrian revolution, civil movement, civil war, ethnicization, sectarianization

In his latest book, *Revolution in Syria: Identity, Networks, and Repression* (Mazur, 2021), Kevin Mazur seeks to answer the following fundamental question: How did a peaceful civil movement turn into a civil war fought primarily along ethnic lines? Mazur analyses how the wide range of claims initially made by the civil movement was narrowed to the ethnic scope and explores what pushed most challengers toward violent interaction with the incumbent regime. In answering this question, he presents a comprehensive outline of what happened during the first year of the Syrian revolution, from March 2011 to March 2012. Mazur argues that the Syrian state or the ruling political regime is dominated by members of a single, small ethnic group, Alawis. This renders the regime ethnically exclusive – that is, it favors ethnic Alawis in term of access to state-controlled resources, while excluding other groups in general and Sunnis in particular. Despite this, Mazur argues, at the outbreak of the uprising, the Syrian regime had a network of relations with society that transcended ethnic and religious-sectarian boundaries. He thus argues that, while the participation of non-Alawi Syrians in this network has been limited, contained, and suppressed by the regime, both passively through its ethnically exclusive structure and actively through its conscious efforts, the network has nonetheless played a significant role in the Syrian revolution. The book also emphasizes that the network has often proved an insufficient tool to counter the challenge of peaceful popular protest. As a result, the regime has resorted to violence, transforming these peaceful civil challenges into violent ethnic confrontations.

The 306-page book sees Mazur thoroughly answering this core question, alongside other, related questions. The book consists of nine chapters, two lists of figures and tables, and an appendix comprising a chronology of significant events in the first year of the Syrian uprising, as well as a lengthy list of references and an index.

Chapter I provides a general and comprehensive introduction to the central questions, assumptions, theses, and theoretical framework, and outlines the subsequent sections and chapters. Chapter II lays out the book's main theoretical claims, and the theoretical framework on which the book is based, which Mazur discusses in detail and empirically substantiates in the following chapters. In Chapter III, Mazur investigates the historical background against which the Syrian revolution broke out in 2011, clarifying the composition of the Syrian regime and the hybrid forms of governance it practiced. Chapter IV describes the development of the significant and critical events of the first year of the Syrian uprising, and presents the five ideal types of contention in this uprising and how contention evolved over time.

Chapters V and VI study the mobilization patterns in the Syrian uprising. While Chapter V focuses on the reasons behind some Syrians' engagement in the early months of the uprising, Chapter VI considers the processes driving non-participation and the

rationales for abstention. In Chapters VII and VIII, Mazur deals with the transformation in the Syrian uprising, which devolved from a peaceful civil uprising to a civil war fought mainly on ethnic lines. Chapter VII explains this process, dealing primarily with the state's repressive strategy and the societal response to it. The following chapter deals with the Kurdish-majority regions. Here, too, the contention was ethnicized, but this contention and ethnicization remained peaceful. The final chapter provides some conclusions and explores the dynamics of the conflict in Syria beyond March 2012.

The introduction offers significant terminological, conceptual, and methodological clarifications. Other than in the final chapter, the book deals exclusively with the first year of the Syrian uprising. It explains the reasons why the uprising has undergone an ethnicization in some contexts, but not in others.

The book's main thesis is that the Syrian uprising has been ethnicized as a result of several factors, foremost of which being that the incumbent political regime is ethnically exclusive. This type of regime does not have many tools at its disposal other than the use of violence, to address challenges or protests it may face. This violence is the main factor in the ethnicization of the uprising. Although religious conflicts within a single religion are widely referred to as 'sectarian', Mazur addresses these differences in the context of the Syrian uprising as revolving around lines of ethnic identity. Noteworthy, too, is his use of the term 'regime' when referring to the ruling power in Syria, emphasizing its conceptual distinction from the concept of 'state' (p. 3). He believes that the main feature of this regime is the ethnic hegemony of the Alawis, alongside the Sunnis' exclusion. However, this ethnic hegemony refers explicitly to Alawite individuals dominant in and over the existing political system. It does not mean that the sect, as a whole, is dominant or ruling. As a result, Mazur avoids talking of a 'minority regime'.

The existence of an ethnically exclusive regime and the use of violence by that regime in response to the protests and the revolutionary challenges it faces are the two main factors that are used to explain the emergence of an ethnic civil war. At first glance, these two factors appear to be present in the Syrian case. First, the regime is mostly dominated by Alawis, who have, in general, far greater access than all other ethnic groups to public or state resources, particularly in terms of their preferential employment in the state and its security institutions. Second, the challenge to this system came primarily from Sunnis. However, Mazur acknowledges several characteristics of the Syrian case that do not fit well with the exclusive use of these two factors in explaining the outbreak of an ethnic civil war in Syria. For example, there are members of the included ethnic group(s) who participated in the challenge to the regime, and many members of the excluded group (Sunnis) refrained from participating in that challenge.

Moreover, the Syrian authoritarian regime did not explicitly adopt an ethnic discourse, but in fact declared its categorical rejection of such discourse. It also established a network of patron and client relations with Sunni individuals and regions. Therefore, Mazur's study of the Syrian case focuses on the confrontation between state or regime agents and social actors at the local level, to explain the ethnicization of the initial challenges and their transformation into an ethnic civil war. The main themes he adopts here are as follows:

1. Ethnic civil war is a revolutionary situation, characterized by high levels of ethnic violence.

2. The primary forms of challenge to ethnically hegemonic authoritarian regimes are usually diverse, in a way that reflects the diversity of pre-contention state-society networks.
3. Violence is not usually the strategic choice of ethnically dominant regimes. Still, the lack of alternative strategies, combined with the fragility of the regime's connections to broad segments of society (particularly excluded groups) can lead to violence being the only option to counter revolutionary challenges.
4. The reactions of the ethnically exclusive regime to revolutionary challenges change the composition and the demands of the participants in these challenges.

The regime's violence is likely to marginalize the national or citizenship demands of the challengers, attracting new social actors with greater capacity for violence, and narrower ethnic slogans, expressions, and demands.

The book develops a theoretical framework for analyzing revolutionary challenges against ethnically exclusive authoritarian regimes, where these challenges have become ethnicized and thus transformed into an ethnic civil war – that is, interactions or confrontations based primarily on ethnic violence between the challengers and the incumbent political regime. This shift occurs as a result of two main factors: the ethnically exclusive characteristics of the regime, and its violent reaction to the challenges it faces. Trans-ethnic networks established by an ethnically exclusive regime mitigate the strength or severity of the regime's exclusiveness. Nonetheless, the regime's use of violence to confront challenges to its rule can largely destroy these networks. This leads to an increasing ethnicization of the confrontation between the incumbent regime and its challengers. An ethnicization of a revolutionary challenge means

> a shift in the scope of challenger claims from a locality- or polity-level focus to be more about an ethnic group, which can occur at any level of violence. It entails the challenger group becoming increasingly composed of members of one ethnic group (or a smaller number of groups than in earlier challenge) and challenger claims becoming focused increasingly in the ethnic group(s), rather than supra- or sub-ethnic units. (p. 37)

In theorizing how an authoritarian political regime obtains the obedience of its subjects at a time of political stability and the factors that lead to the subsequent destabilization of such a regime, Mazur adopts two basic concepts: the polity model and the revolutionary situation. The polity model refers to the competition between social actors for state-controlled resources and government-controlled means of coercion. Given that the share each party attains in this competition may vary regionally, Mazur argues that this issue should be studied at the local rather than the national level. The revolutionary situation begins when the excluded group or groups reject the status quo, demanding that they become part of the polity and receive their share of the state-controlled resources. Mazur's classification of the conflicts arising from this revolutionary situation is based on a two-dimensional scale: (1) the scope of challenger identity claims and (2) the extent to which violence dominates their interaction with the regime agents. This two-dimensional scale forms the theoretical basis for Mazur's classification of the various actions taken by challengers during the first year of the uprising.

Mazur emphasizes that ethnicization is a diachronic and top-down process, which occurs through a combination of ethnic exclusion and the practice of violence and coercion based on the regime's patchwork of relations with the populations under its authority. These relations combine two sorts of authorities: patrimonial authority, which rules based on kin ties and personal allegiance and rational-legal authority. In this patchwork, the ethnically exclusive regime forges a trans-ethnic network, while still giving members of the dominant ethnicity greater access to state-controlled resources.

In addition, the theoretical framework on which the book is based presents the key features of the initial forms of challenge facing such a regime, as well as the regime's response to them. These challenges are primarily initiated by local groups lacking sufficient access to state-controlled resources, and who are not members of the polity, as a result of their lack of involvement in the regime's trans-ethnic relational networks with society. The challenges are also characterized by weak or limited participation in the regime by those of the dominant ethnicity. In its initial reaction to the challenges, the regime's primary and most common strategy has been to strengthen its connections to both the dominant ethnicity and its trans-ethnic networks, offering some concessions and conciliations. At the same time, the regime employs these associations to confront the challenge to its authority.

Most ethnically exclusive authoritarian regimes do not have the capacity to expand their patronage and cliental networks enough to contain these challenges. As a result, the regime resorts to the use of repression, violence, and other tactics increasing (the possibility of) the ethnicization of such challenges, risking transforming the challenge into an ethnic civil war. The book's regional perspective highlights two fundamental issues regarding revolutionary challenges faced by ethnically hegemonic regimes. On one hand, it is rare for the state governed by such regimes to explicitly adopt ethnicization as a strategy for containing a revolutionary challenge. Instead, ethnicization 'is primarily a second-order consequence of ethnically dominated regimes' limited space for maneuver in the face of revolutionary challenge' (p. 58). On the other hand, 'when ethnicity becomes the dominant "vision of division" in a conflict, it gains this status through the interaction of challenger and incumbent, rather than as a direct function of demography' (p. 59).

The conclusion summarizes the book's main thesis regarding the ethnically exclusive nature of the ruling authoritarian Syrian regime and the critical role of both that exclusivity and the regime's networks within and relations to (parties in) Syrian society in determining the nature and the diachronic development of the uprising. In addition, this final chapter provides a thorough review of some of the most important theoretical implications of Mazur's interpretation of the first year of the Syrian revolution/uprising. Mazur links this vision to events in Syria between 2012 and 2018 and to possible outcomes in Syria after the end of the war. In this regard, Mazur emphasizes three major points.

First, Mazur asserts that the Syrian case is specific, as a result of the particularities of its 50 years of Baath rule. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that this does not and should not negate the similarity of the Syrian regime to many other ethnically exclusive regimes. This similarity is seen in the logic of governance and oppression, alongside its manipulation of unions, traditional kinship, and material resources, to establish a network of relations with (some segments of) society in order to secure its loyalty. In contrast to other studies of ethnically exclusive regimes, Mazur's book includes empirical research, and

reflects a shift of interest in the study of ethnicization and civil war, from the ethnic group as a whole, to specific social actors making specific demands of the state. According to Mazur, this shift makes it possible to answer the following question: How does the rule of an ethnically exclusive regime produce an (ethnic) revolutionary challenge against it, according to different disciplines and perspectives?

Second, Mazur justifies limiting his book to first year of the revolution. He argues that the disadvantages of this approach are the necessary price to pay for providing a more detailed study of the first year. This is not only because such a detailed study can provide more accurate and reliable knowledge of this first year but also because its results may enable an understanding of the subsequent phases of the revolution. Although those subsequent phases involve a partial and relative rupture with the progress of the first year of the revolution, this rupture is certainly not complete. Indeed, it can be argued that there are essential commonalities between the first year and those that followed. In terms of the ruling regime's structure and actions, Mazur writes, such commonalities include the regime's continued use of a divide-and-rule strategy and of its networks within society, in its attempts to contain and end the uprising. This is demonstrated, for example, by the establishment of the militias of the National Defence Forces and by Assad's dealings with the Kurdish militias affiliated with the Democratic Union Party.

Third, after a brief presentation of the enormous damage that the civil war has inflicted both economically and on Syria's physical and social fabric, Mazur argues that a new order has started to emerge and is being crystallized in contemporary Syria. As the regime has successfully avoided being overthrown, it has begun to weave new networks and relationships with local communities. This is in light of its growing ability to restrict the return of Syrian citizens to their own regions, and to decide on the issue of ownership or expropriation of homes and land, enabling it to alter an area's demographics. For this purpose, the regime issued Law No. 10 of 2018, which allows the expropriation or confiscation of vast tracts of land. A new class of brokers has also emerged, to provide economic and political services to the regime, and, in return, receive facilities and privileges. This is in parallel with the regime maintaining its pre-existing network of relations with many local communities, such as in Jaramana. Mazur concludes the book by stating that 'How these connections are reestablished or forged anew out of the fragments of the old sociopolitical order may provide observers with many of the best clues for understanding the new order emerging in contemporary Syria'.

So far in this review, I have presented the core content of Mazur's book, using its terminology and referring to its ideas, without giving my own view on the content, terms, and ideas. In what follows, I will briefly present some critical and general observations and remarks, which I shall primarily limit to a discussion of the book's main thesis.

The sectarian/ethnic perspective is one of the most prominent perspectives used in studying political and societal conditions in the Islamic Arab world. According to this perspective, the main divisions in society are on lines of identities based on religion, ethnicity, or sectarian affiliation. At first glance, Kevin Mazur appears to adopt this perspective in his book. His description of the ruling political regime, and of those who have rebelled against it, supported it, or remained silent is based primarily on their ethnicity or sectarian affiliation. However, this first impression should be revised.

Mazur's ethno-sectarian perspective does not involve a primordial essentialist vision. It emphasizes a need to go beyond the simplistic belief that (political) sectarianism or

ethnicization is merely the mechanical result or function of the sectarian or ethnic distribution of the population. Instead, it stresses that the sectarianization or ethnicization of a conflict is a process whose causes and motives, and the strategies of those who influence it, require careful and individual analysis if they are to be understood and explained.

The debate surrounding whether a 'sect' or 'ethnicity' exists as a socio-political actor without a political act of sectarianization or ethnicization can be bypassed here. Sects and sectarianism were present in Syria long before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. That said, neither Mazur's basing the identity of all Syrians on their religious, ethnic, or sectarian affiliations, nor his taking that identification as an explanation of their attitudes toward the ruling regime and the uprising against it, should be accepted unquestioningly.

To be explained alongside the numerous Alawis' or other minorities' participation in the Syrian uprising, is the fact that a considerable number of Sunnis did not participate, or took an ambivalent or even hostile stance toward the movement. An explanation of the uprising based on sectarian or ethnic affiliation might have some success in explaining the lack of demonstrations or mass protests by Alawis in areas where they form the numerical majority. However, such an explanation may struggle to explain why a large number of Ismailis participated in the Syrian uprising in regions in which they constitute a numerical majority, such as Salamiyya. Furthermore, the greatest difficulty facing a sectarian or ethnic explanation is the great division in the Sunnis' attitudes toward the uprising.

Mazur was aware of these difficulties. However, this awareness did not lead him, or many others, to abandon his theoretical framework or the ethnic/sectarian interpretation it contained. Instead, it simply provoked some additions and modifications to his interpretive theoretical vision. He introduced a second explanatory basis: the networks and relationships that the regime established with (some parts of) Syrian society. His complex explanatory model is thus based on both ethnic affiliation and the networks mentioned above, as well as the regime's 'compulsion' to use violence. Mazur also maintains the necessity of a local, subnational study of the uprising, a regional focus which is crucial for understanding the factors that led the Syrians of those local areas to (not) participate in the revolution. Mazur believed his model allowed the possibility of explaining the outbreak of the uprising against the regime, its progress, and its gradual transformation from a peaceful national uprising to an ethnic civil war. The revolution of some Sunnis is rendered explainable by the fact that they are excluded from the ruling political system. The refusal of some Sunnis to participate in the revolution is equally explainable, not by their sectarian/ethnical affiliation, but by the network of relationships that link them to the state/the ruling regime.

Despite Mazur's additions and modifications, his expanded model does not seem to be fully successful in explaining the causes and developments of the Syrian uprising. Arguably, the weakness of Mazur's model lies precisely in its purporting to provide a comprehensive and complete explanation of events. It has pretensions of explaining everything regarding the Syrian revolution. The Sunnis revolted here (e.g. in Daraa and Douma) because they were excluded from the ethnically exclusive regime, and they did not revolt there (e.g. in Aleppo and Damascus) because of the conciliatory relations that link many of them to the regime. One must ask, however, why the Sunnis in Raqqa did not (heavily) participate in the revolution against the regime and the state, even though

they are both excluded from it and lack good networks and relationships with it, as Mazur himself shows in both this book and another text (Mazur, 2018). Mazur's answer to this question is the existence of a network linking the regime to some local, tribal, and clan notables in that city. However, does the regime not have a similar network in Douma, for example, and a stronger network in Daraa? Mazur's answer to these questions refers to elements outside his explanatory model, often without acknowledging, either explicitly or implicitly, that this highlights the limitations of the model.

In Mazur's book, the Syrians (especially those revolting against the regime) are generally not presented as a people, as individuals, or as civic groups. They are not presented as a people, in the political sense of the word; even when discussing their peaceful, citizenship-focused challenges related to political demands that are neither sectarian nor ethnic in nature, Mazur refers to the challengers by their ethnic or sectarian identity. This is because his book has adopted two basic criteria in its classification of the Syrians: one ethnic-sectarian and one local or regional. Under these two criteria, the Syrians are absent as either a people or as individuals. They are stripped of their individuality through being defined entirely by their association with some community or region. This entirely ignores their possible civil affiliations; they are not presented as being affiliated with any political party, ideology, or vision. Rather, their political orientations are interpreted and explained by their involuntary communal or local associations, or by the network of interests that links these individuals or groups to the regime. There is no attempt, for example, to categorize Syrians based on their political ideas, ideologies, or orientations. This is despite there being divides between those who seek democracy, (political) freedoms, or liberalism, and those who reject them. However, Mazur himself recognizes that politics explains the existence of sects and ethnicities, or at least sectarian or ethnic attitudes, events, and actions. What then is the purpose of talking about ethnic affiliations, in the context of a political act that presents itself as non-ethnic and non-sectarian, or even anti-ethnic or anti-sectarian?

Mazur's definition of Syrians in terms of their ethnicities does not lead him to see the civil war that the conflict devolved into as the inevitable result of the sectarian structure of the regime or Syrian society, as Nicholas Van Dam did in his book *Destroying a Nation* (Van Dam, 2017). Mazur does not adopt Van Dam's thesis of 'sectarian inevitability', which was rightly criticized by Yassin al-Haj Saleh in his review of that book (Saleh, 2020). In contrast to Van Dam, whose explanation of this supposed inevitability takes an essentialist and primordial view of the social and political sectarianism in Syrian society, Mazur emphasizes historical examples in which revolutionary challenges to ethnically exclusive regimes did not lead to an ethnic civil war such as the revolutionary challenges in Oman in 2011 and Sudan in 1991. Mazur explains the outbreak of the ethnic civil war through a combination of the regime's ethnically exclusive authoritarian system, on one hand, and its violent reactions to the revolutionary challenge, on the other. Indeed, Mazur's book sometimes gives the impression that the regime had no choice other than violence, or that violence was not its primary strategic choice. Ultimately, though, he does not deny that violence was only one option among several that the regime could have resorted to. He admits that the Syrian uprising was not deterministically fated to end in civil war and could have seen a different outcome. Nevertheless, Mazur's focus is on the regime's agency, not that of the Syrians revolting against it.

A revolution or uprising against an authoritarian regime is a political event par excellence, and there is no doubt that we can and should talk about the social and economic contexts of such events. This was done, for example, by Muhammad Jamal Barut in his ground-breaking text on the first year of the Syrian revolution (Barut, 2012). However, it is necessary to allow what is political to remain political, at least partially, away from the complete reduction of politics to its economic, social, or ethnic context. Considering (some) Syrians as political actors means acknowledging the epistemological impossibility of reducing them or their agency to their involuntary associations or any other economic or social structures. This includes recognizing those individuals that adopt ideas, values, demands, or ideologies transcending their family, religious, ethnic, or local identities, or any other subjective or objective structures. It also includes a systematic attempt to understand these individuals on the basis of their self-awareness and motives, not merely explaining their values away with objective and involuntary factors, structures, or causes. Mazur's description of the structure of the regime that contributed to the ethnicization of the revolution is useful and enlightening. It helps to move beyond the excessive focus on the contribution to the uprising's ethnicization by individuals and political actors supporting or participating in the uprising. This excessive reduction to the role of individual actors can be seen in, for example, a recently published paper by Basileus Zeno (2022). Nevertheless, a balance between the two kinds of factors – structural and individual – is required. Striking this balance does not mean taking a middle position between the two, such that they are equal in terms of causal power or explanatory function. Instead, it means giving each party its due, without exaggeration or negligence. They represent two sides of the same coin, to use the words of Anthony Giddens. Giddens agrees with most theorists from the humanities and social sciences (for example, Pierre Bourdieu and Margaret Archer) (Callinicos, 2004; Elder-Vass, 2010) regarding the need to combine the two ideas and establish the possibility of dialectical and complementary relationships between them.

The book presents Syrians as agents through its reference to their texts, ideas, and opinions. This is in contrast to other research on the revolution, which considers Syrians only as an object for study and research, rather than as intellectual agents whose own perspectives should be considered (Pinto, 2017). Mazur has taken this into account by referring to most of the relevant Arabic and Syrian references and sources. Relying on and referring to Syrian perspectives, however, does not necessarily mean adopting them. Most of the critical terms adopted by Mazur generally intersect with the perspectives of pro-revolutionary Syrians, in terms of talking about a revolution, an uprising, or Assad's authoritarian regime, as well as the distinction between regime and state – a distinction that Assad himself has vehemently rejected. Some of the book's terms and concepts seem problematic, such as Mazur's use of ethnicity or ethnicization and their substitution for the terms and concepts of sect and sectarianization, which seem to be very controversial. Syrians do not refer to religious differences between them (between Sunnis and Alawis, for example) as ethnic differences, but rather as sectarian differences.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that these critical notes do not intend to undermine the value of the reviewed book, but rather to highlight both its value and its limits simultaneously. In fact, after studying Mazur's book, I consider it valuable and necessary

reading for any scholar interested in the subjects with which it deals. I hope that my (critical) review has demonstrated this usefulness and necessity.

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Author biography

Housamedden Darwish is an associate senior researcher at the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences 'Multiple Secularities–Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities' at Leipzig University, and a lecturer at a number of German universities (Cologne, Leipzig, Erfurt, Duisburg-Essen), since 2016. His academic output focuses on questions of democracy and secularism in the Arab and Islamicate world, particularly in modern and contemporary Arab thought. He holds a PhD from the Department of Philosophy at Bordeaux Montaigne University, with a specialization in hermeneutics. He has authored three books in French and five in Arabic, as well as dozens of peer-reviewed papers in both English and Arabic. He has held visiting researcher positions at the Department of Philosophy, University of Duisburg-Essen, and at the Institute of Languages and Cultures of the Islamicate World, University of Cologne.