

Arab Family Studies: Critical Reviews. *Suad Joseph*, ed. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse

University Press, 2018. 640 pp.

ROSE WELLMAN

University of Michigan–Dearborn

Arab Family Studies is a much-needed critical review of the scholarly literature on Arab families. The book not only provides a country-by-country overview of the research on Arab families but makes a vital argument for the centrality of the family in the region. As the volume's editor, Suad Joseph, writes, "family remains the most powerful social idiom throughout the Arab region" (1) and "the production of families in the Arab region is foundational to the production of Arab societies" (3). The volume is a unique exploration of how families in the Arab world are shaping and being shaped by economies, labor forces, political realities, market conditions, social reforms, social movements, and global transformations. It shows that family is inextricably tied to state making, power, and policy, and it identifies unanswered questions for future research.

To cover the Arab world is a Herculean task, and the book is massive. Seventeen chapters offer country-by-country reviews (two chapters cover more than one country), and seven more focus on thematic issues. The chapters on specific countries detail the scholarship on the family in North Africa, including Algeria (Marnia Lazreg), Egypt (Nefissa Naguib), Libya (Anna Baldinetti), Morocco (Zakia Salime), Tunisia (Lamia Benyoussef), Sudan (Balghis Badri and Hwiada AbuBaker), and Somalia (Cawo Mohamed Abdi). They also review the Eastern Arab states: Iraq (Nadje Al-Ali), Lebanon (Zeina Zaatari), Syria (Dawn Chatty), Palestine (Islah Jad), and Jordan (Seteney Shami). And they focus on the Arab Gulf: Saudi Arabia (May Al-Dabbagh and Ghalia Gargani),

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/amet.12771](https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12771).

This article is protected by copyright. All rights reserved.

Yemen (Susanne Dahlgren), Kuwait (Ereny Zarif and Helen Rizzo), the United Arab Emirates and Oman (Rima Sabban), and Bahrain and Qatar (Rima Sabban).

The thematic chapters cover critical issues in Arab family studies such as the centrality of Islamic family law in the region (Judith Tucker), fertility, masculinity, and demography (Marcia Inhorn), and the intersections of education, war, and media (Penny Johnson). Other key chapters address issues of schooling, gender, and education (Fida Adely and Michael Hendrix), the shift from acculturation paradigms to feminist intersectionality paradigms in research on Arab Americans (Nadine Suleiman Naber), families and social media (Linda Herrera), and the relationship between families and migration (Paul Tabar).

Two main themes stand out. The first is a critique of essentialism in the historical study of Arab families. For instance, many of the volume's authors problematize the colonialist labeling of families as "traditional" or "modern" and critique the very assumption that there is such a thing as a unified "Arab family." Relatedly, several authors decry the essentialist opposition of the "tribal, patriarchal, patrilineal Arab family" and "the Western or European family," wherein the "Arab family" is a never-changing, othering prototype. They call for postcolonial feminist approaches to families in the Arab world and a more nuanced analysis of the historical and political conditions through which particular concepts of family and gender are produced in particular historical and political situations. The result of this feminist, nonessentialist perspective is an increased attention to how Arab families are constituted by multiple and shifting forces of power and oppression, including but not limited to capitalism, postcolonialism, nationalism, race, and class.

The second major theme of the volume is change. How have families and the discourses surrounding families been shaped by societal change? How have they been

restructured according to evolving local and international discourses variously framed as religious, cultural, or medical? And how have scholarly approaches to such families similarly shifted according to historical events, theories of modernization, and other trends in research? For instance, Nadjé Al-Ali argues that knowledge production in and about Iraq is deeply entangled with its tumultuous history, including years of authoritarian rule, comprehensive sanctions, war, occupation, increasing sectarian tensions, and an ongoing lack of security. She calls for ethnographic research that explores how family relationships are linked to changing economic, social, and political systems. Indeed, many of the volume's authors express the need for a renewal of ethnographic, intensive, and microscale studies of family to clarify the development of concepts, attend more closely to history, and consider how family intersects with state making, religion, law, technology, and citizenship.

Arab Family Studies also offers a multitude of unanswered questions for further research, many of which are compiled by Suad Joseph in the concluding chapter. What, for instance, is the role of families in state power, and how does the state influence and shape those same families? How are Islamic movements trying to reform families, and how do laypeople understand the relationships among family structures, powers, and authorities? How are laws changing so that women can pass citizenship on to their children or not, and how do these changes affect migration? What is more, how are Arab states using women (and their families) as markers of their international platforms? Key here are investigations that document how women themselves are navigating these processes, pitfalls, and opportunities. Another key area of further research is the impact of state violence, war, and displacement on families and children. Given the enormous regional destabilization of the populations of Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Sudan as well as the effects of this on Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey, research is

needed on the violent disruption of family structures and on possible futures and policy planning for these fractured families. Finally, the volume raises key questions about families and technology (e.g., social media). What aspects of family are enabled or marginalized by technology and online media platforms in contexts of migration, war, and economic insecurity?

Arab Family Studies is a wonderful resource for scholars pursuing research in the Middle East and North Africa as well as those who want to understand the persistent life of kinship in modernity more broadly. As a scholar not only of the Middle East but also of kinship, I can imagine the intriguing ways that the authors of this volume and its readers might join this work with feminist analyses of kinship and relatedness to consider the myriad ways that kinship may be constituted and demarcated in the Arab world in and beyond blood or genealogy, as well as the cultural and social entanglements of kinship and economics and kinship and politics. How might our understandings of Arab families further sharpen if we conceive of families in the region—as we now conceive of gender—not only as a priori givens (whether by God, genealogy, or nature) but also as units in the (un)making, embedded in local values and cultural practices and formed through past and present experiences?