



Fall 2020

Dear colleagues, students and friends of CMES,

To mark the beginning of my directorship at the [Center for Middle East Studies](#) (CMES) at Brown, I would like to take a moment to [introduce myself](#) and greet you all. My message comes at a time of unprecedented hardship and challenges for all of us: when we are concerned about the health and well-being of ourselves and our loved ones; when pre-existing inequalities and forms of marginalization have become even more visible and devastating; and when much of what we took for granted in terms of travel, mobility and socializing is suddenly not possible anymore. Yet, in the midst of these incredibly difficult circumstances, we have also seen rays of hope as millions of people in the U.S. and globally have stood up to oppose anti-black racism and express their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter Movement. It is within this tension of incredible challenges and hope that I take up my new position.

I see my role as building on the excellent work and achievements by my two predecessors, Professors Beshara Doumani and Shahzad Bashir, who have both contributed greatly to creating an intellectual community of faculty and students, as well as putting Middle East Studies at Brown on the map nationally and internationally. I would like to thank them both. I am also grateful to all of you who are constituting a vibrant community of scholars and engaged friends, committed to and interested in the Middle East and its diasporas.

During my time as director of CMES, I would like to enable colleagues and students to pursue their intellectual passions, while also encouraging us to push ourselves into new directions and expand our horizons. More specifically, I would like to add a women and gender studies strand to our current themes pursued within [initiatives](#) and [projects](#). Recent developments in the region have illustrated clearly that women and the wider politics of gender are central to understanding the histories and current contestations of state-society relations, political mobilization, mobility and displacement, legal reform, access to economic resources, labor relations, challenges to political authoritarianism as well as violent backlashes against protests and resistance. I would like to make CMES a focal point for exploring and discussing the politics of gender not only within the Middle East and its diasporas, but also comparatively with colleagues working in and on [Africa](#), [Latin America](#), [the Caribbean](#) as well as [South Asia](#) within our institutional home, that is the [Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs](#) at Brown, and beyond.

Another strand I would like to develop over the next years links to our responsibility to explore intersectional struggles around anti-black racism and forms racialization in the Middle East. As scholars and students of this region, we are intimately familiar with the battles for dignity and freedom by colonized, occupied, disenfranchised and oppressed people in the region. We are inspired by and stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and the millions of protesters in the United States and all over the

world who are calling for justice and equality. Yet, I am acutely aware that merely declaring our solidarity in statements is meaningless unless we follow our words with initiatives and action that aim to challenge and transform the knowledge we produce and share, while also addressing our institutional biases and structural racism. We are ethically, politically, and intellectually accountable to pay attention to the long history and ongoing forms of anti-black racism within the region and amongst relevant diaspora communities. It is always harder to look closer to home than far away when addressing these painful issues. I am committed to initiating internal conversations and dialogue within Middle East Studies and to organizing activities which will engage with the global issues of structural racism and linked forms of exploitation.

Although we will not be able to see as much of each other in person as I would have hoped for during this coming academic year, please rest assured that I am passionately committed to supporting our community within Brown while also engaging with colleagues, students and friends globally. We have already put together an exciting [program for the fall](#), and hope you will join us on-line, either during the actual events or watching a recording afterwards. And I do hope that further down the line in my directorship, I will be able to once again, host and greet you in person on our campus.

Best wishes,

Nadje Al-Ali

Director, Center for Middle East Studies
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