

Themes for MA dissertations (updated 9 Oct 2017)

Dear all!

Below you will find relevant themes for MA dissertations as suggested by IKOS Faculty members during the Granavolden seminar in September 2015 with updates and additions from September 2016 and August-September 2017. By selecting a topic from this list you are likely to have a thesis supervisor whose research interests coincide with yours. The topics are listed in the order they were presented at the seminar, followed by themes suggested by Faculty members not present at Granavolden. At the very end you will find my own suggestions.

Brynjar

Professor Bjørn Olav Utvik, Head of Department (updated Sep 2017)

- ❖ The Muslim Brothers in Egypt: the development of internal regulations: democracy vs. centralization.
- ❖ Egyptian Islamists after the 2013 coup: rethinking strategies
- ❖ The Gulf-based salafi Hizb al-Umma and the ideology of Hakim al-Mutayri: a revolutionary non-jihadi salafism?
- ❖ Islamists and gender relations: Islamist women's activism in Morocco: defending or undermining patriarchy?
- ❖ Islamists and the post-revolutionary order: the case of the Tunisian Nahda movement

Sources material and/or contacts for field work are available for students interested in writing master degree theses on these topics.

Professor Berit Thorbjørnsrud (updated 7 Sep 2017)

- ❖ *To what extent do local Christians (Palestinians Armenians, etc.) enjoy freedom of religion in Israel?* The Church of Multiplication of loaves and fishes was recently torched by Jewish extremists. This is only the last example of an increasing number of hate attacks against Christians in Israel. By taking this attack as a case study, (looking at the various interpretations of what happened; what did the police do; will there be a court case; local Jewish and local Christian reactions, etc.) one may approach a fruitful discussion of religious freedom - in practice.
- ❖ *When a high number of Russian Jews were flown into Israel, 25-30 000 Christians came along - as family members of Jews - or as Jews. What has happened to these Christians?* What kind of rights did they obtain - equal to Jews? Can they buy land owned by Jews (which Palestinian Christians - and Muslims cannot). Can they marry Christian foreigners and move them to Israel (which Palestinian Christians cannot) how do they perceive themselves vis a vis Palestinian/Armenian Christians? How are they perceived by Jews - particularly Jewish extremists? What kind of status do they get - do they belong or not?
- ❖ *Studying the rich: Elite weddings in five-star hotels.* By studying such weddings one may study class, gender, religious identity; how networks are created, etc.

- ❖ *Christians in Jordan*. How do they relate to the destruction of Christians communities in neighboring countries? Do they become more Christians - and less Jordanians? Does this increase their desire to emigrate?
- ❖ *Religious minorities*
- ❖ *Topics related to gender, honor and shame*

Associate Professor Teresa Pepe (updated Sep 2017)

1: Arabic Digital Literature. The emergence of new literary genres on the Internet

- Blogs as “new” forms of autobiography in Arabic Literature (see for example Tunisia or the Gulf).
- The emergence of new literary genres on the Internet: es. the «Twitter Story», or the «very short story» (*al-qīṣṣa al-twītriyya* التويترية القصّة or *al-qīṣṣa al-qaṣīra jiddan* القصة القصيرة جدا «ق ق ج» أو)
- How do writers and or/intellectuals use social networks today? (What do they write about? How do they engage with the public online?)

2. Arabic Language on the Internet:

- Which varieties are used on the Internet? (analyse for example blogs, social networks)
- Ortography of Arabic on the Internet
- “Arabizi” (Arabic written with Latin letters and numbers) in Arabic print cultural production (es. novels, memoirs etc.). When? Why? What is the function?

3: Media Transitions in the Arab World: Actual and Historical perspective

- The Return of *Dhāt*: from the Novel (1992) to the TV Drama (2013)? Analyse the adaptation of the novel *Dhāt* by the Egyptian author Sonallah Ibrahim (Ṣun’ Allāh Ibrāhīm) into a *musalsal* (Ramadan TV Series) shown in 2013. How do stories travel from one media to another (see theories of adaptation)? How is the female character Dhāt transformed by the experience of the Egyptian uprisings? Controversy around the TV drama, shot in Egypt during the period of Mohammad Morsy presidency (2012)
- Diaries of the Revolution: *Mudhakkirāt ‘arbagī* by Nagīb Sulayman (1922). Autofictional novel written in installment on a newspaper, right after the 1919 revolution in Egypt. Compare to a blog?
- *Top Goon*, Youtube Series by the Syrian collective Masasit Mati. A digital adaptation of the medieval Arabic shadow theatre . Role of humour as a tool for political resistance.

4. After The Flood: Dystopia and Post-Apocalypse in Arabic Fiction

- Dystopia as a booming genre in Arabic literature today. Why dystopia? What visions of the future do these authors offer? How do these visions relate to the current political situation?
- Dystopia is a current world literature/cultural phenomenon (think also of TV series and movies). How does Arabic dystopia relate to dystopia in other literatures? What is special about Arabic dystopia?
- Dystopia and climate change. Environmental degradation is a major problem in the Arab region. Inspired by theoretical ideas from ecocriticism, you could explore how environmental themes are dealt in the novels, with a special focus on imaginations about climate change and the consequences of global warming. How is climate change imagined in Arabic fiction? What is the scope for agency? What models do the novels give?

Possible titles for analysis:

1. *Utopia* [Yūtūbiya] (2009) by Ahmad Khalid Tawfiq;

2. *Alexandria 2050* [al-Iskandariyya 2050] (2009) by Subhi Fahmawy;
3. *Geography of Water* [Jughrāfiyyat al-mā'] (2009) by Abdunasser Mugali;
4. *Love Outside the Cold* [Ḥubb khārij al-bard] (2010) by Kāmil Farḥān Ṣāliḥ
5. *The kidnapping* [al-Ikhtiṭāf, awwalan & thāniyyan] (2011 & 2014) by Hamad al-Hamad;
6. *The New Testament* [al-'Ahd al-Jadīd] (2011) by Khalid al-Barry,
7. *The Queue* [al-Tabur] (2013) by Basma Abd al-Aziz;
8. *Women of Karantina* [Nisā' al-Karantīna] (2013) by Nael Eltoukhy;
9. *A Paradise on Earth* [Janna 'alā al-Arḍ] (2015) by Fadi Zahgmūt;
10. *Using Life* [Istikhḍām al-ḥayāt] (2015) by Ahmad Nagi.
11. *Otared* ['Uṭārid] (2015) by Mohammad Rabie

Professor Stephan Guth (updated Sep2017):

[NB: You may also ask for a separate document with more details on Stephan Guth's thesis theme suggestions and how they relate to ongoing research projects at the Department]

Etymology of Arabic

- ❖ (Etymology proper) Theories about original bi-radicalism in Arabic [a topic discussed again and again in Arabic and Semitic Studies: are 3-consonantal roots "derived" from original 2-consonantal ones? Many 3-cons. roots that have identical 1st and 2nd radical and only differ in the 3rd have a very similar meaning: FRD, FRS, FRŠ, FRQ, ... all from *FR- ?]
- ❖ (Etymology and cultural history) The Etymology of Arabic words for spices and what it tells us about cultural history [Many cultural goods have made a long way, both into Arabic and from Arabic into European languages—a vast field where many interesting things can be learned about cultural history]

Conceptual history

- ❖ (synchronous, in a text or with an author) The concept of *tarbiya* in Ḥ. al-Marṣafī's 'Eight Concepts'; *ghurba* in the novel X by author Y; ... [I can imagine many theses of this type: the student reads a text and extracts from it the author's understanding of a certain culturally important concept, like "equality", "citizenship", etc.]
- ❖ (diachronic, semantic change) The semantic history of *dawla* [here, the meaning/use of a culturally important term is studied in its historical development, over time: umma, thaqāfa, ḥaḍāra, ...]
- ❖ (comparative) What is English 'X' in Arabic? (X = freedom, democracy, individual/ity, equality, ...); *adab* vs. *literature* ; *sharī'a* vs. *law* ; *fann* vs. *art* ; ... [the main idea of this type of study is the comparison between Western and Arabic languages and cultures]

Modern Arabic Literature (and Cinema)

- ❖ ('hot') analysis and contextualisation of an IPAF winning (or short-listed) novels, e.g., S. al-San'ūsī's *Sāq al-Bāmbū* (2013, on the situation of migrant workers in Gulf societies), A. Sa'dāwī's *Frānkīnshṭāyn fī Baghdād* (2014, dystopia, the dead coming back and taking revenge), Sh. Makhbūṭ's *al-Talyānī* (2015, on Tunisian history from Bourguiba to Ben Ali), M. Rabī's *'Uṭārid* (2014, imagining situation in Egypt in the year 2023 – horrifying!)
- ❖ (topic-focussed) "Life trajectories of migrants/refugees in Kh. al-Khamīsī's *Safīnat Nūḥ*", "The process of individualisation in Y. Zaydān's *'Azāzīl*" (immediately related to the question of 'becoming oneself', finding one's identity, resisting society's pressure), "Revolting against traditional authorities in..." [I have a list over the most frequent topics in the 130 novels that

have been long- or shortlisted for the International Prize of Arabic Fiction IPAF – all show interesting tendencies about life in the present-day Arab world]

- ❖ (focus on literary language or structure): “The tension between vernacular and MSA in ...”, “Techniques of destruction and re-construction in...”
- ❖ (new genres): utopia, crime fiction, thriller, autofiction, *adab sākhir* (‘subversive, carnivalesque, hacking literature’)
- ❖ movies!, incl. Ramaḍān series [pick out one or more recent Arabic films, e.g., at a Film Festival, analyze and contextualize it]
- ❖ (particularly interesting countries) diaspora/exile, Saudi-Arabia, Syria, Irak; (In 2016) Egypt, Tunisia

In 2016—How it felt to life in the Arab World five years after the “Arab Spring”

- ❖ Many of the topics mentioned under “Literature” above also have an “In 2016” dimension, i.e., there is a lot of related material around that has been gathered by the “In 2016” research group, on issues like “Gated communities”, “Baby Milk”, the “Red Island Affair” in Egypt, etc. etc. Two excellent master theses have just been completed from within this project (one on Egyptian “nostalgia”, another on some episodes in a Ramaḍān *musalsal*)

Associate Professor Albrecht Hofheinz (updated Sep2017)

- ❖ “In 2016”: analysis of social media sources, esp. select public Facebook pages, within the context of the “In 2016” research project (for which see <http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/projects/the-arab-world-five-years-after-the-arab-spring/>).
- ❖ Patriarchy and gender roles as reflected in (and challenged by?) social media
- ❖ Developments in Arab musical expression/performance
- ❖ Atheism on the rise in the Arab world?
- ❖ Sufi reactions to current salafi/jihadi 'vogue'
- ❖ Climate change and ‘green’ movements in the Arab world
- ❖ Contesting ‘local’ views of ‘international’ organisations: Human rights organisations, ICRC, etc
- ❖ Bodies in public & private: disciplining / hiding / displaying, changing...; e.g.: skin bleaching in SD; the national [as opposed to the international] debate around female genital cutting in SD; the differential treatment of women wearing trousers in SD.

Associate Professor Joakim Parslow (updated Sep2017):

- ❖ My suggested themes pertain mainly to Turkey, but a few of them could just as easily be applied to other MENA countries. They also focus mainly on current developments, but I imagine several of them could be extended into the past if you want to write a more historically oriented thesis.
- ❖ First, as events such as the 2013 “Gezi” protests made clear, Turkish civil society has become a real force to be reckoned with. During the protests, NGOs of all stripes—think tanks, labor unions, professional organizations such as the bar associations, the Chamber of Architects and the Turkish Medical Association—emerged as voices of opposition, and demonstrated that the AK Parti regime’s power could be curtailed by societal forces. Not surprisingly, the AK Parti reacted to this resistance by attempting and in some cases succeeding to undermine these NGO’s autonomy from state interference. What has happened to them since? Is there still a vibrant, independent Turkish civil society, or has the AK Parti managed to tame them? How do these organizations view themselves and their role under the AK Parti’s Turkey?

- ❖ A second, related aspect of civil society worth studying is the huge support, part organized and part seemingly spontaneous, that the AK Parti enjoys throughout Turkey. Since the 1990s, an enormous amount of scholarship has sought to ascertain the role of civil society in fostering open, liberal and stable democracies. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the other side of civil society—the organizations, associations and less tangible networks that serve to maintain undemocratic, corrupt, or even authoritarian regimes. What are the main organizations and individuals that serve to maintain grassroots support for the AK Parti? Are they simply extensions of the AK Parti’s central command or do they also play an independent role in shaping the regime’s policies and adapting its message to local communities? Do they moderate or exacerbate the regime’s authoritarian tendencies?
- ❖ Another part of Turkish society that has undergone dramatic changes during the last few years is the media. Comparatively little systematic work has been done on Turkish media. Yet since at least 2008, innumerable journalists have been fired for criticizing the AK Party or its leaders, and powerful media groups such as Doğan have been brought to the brink of collapse. Is it still possible to speak of an independent “fourth estate” in Turkey?
- ❖ A related topic for those with strong Turkish reading skills is to study Turkish intellectuals. Such a study could either delve deep into the writings or thought of just one or two intellectuals—columnists, novelists, journalists, jurists, academics, etc.—or attempt to identify and substantiate ideational tendencies within larger communities or networks of thinkers.
- ❖ Finally, Turkish society has not remained untouched by the dramatic developments across its Syrian and Iraqi borders. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Turkey has become one of the largest recipients of refugees in the world, a role for which it was unprepared both politically and in terms of resources. How has the influx of Syrians fleeing war changed Turkish political discourse? How has it challenged or changed existing political cleavages? How do Syrians experience being refugees in Turkey? How is the challenge of “ISIS” being met by Turkish officials, media, intellectuals, NGOs, etc.?

Adjunct Associate Professor Jacob Høigilt (updated Sep 2017):

- ❖ Media: How has the media contributed to polarization in the Middle East (not just Arab spring, there’s plenty to choose from in Israel, Turkey)
- ❖ Media: Comics for grown-ups in the Middle East: Themes, how they depict and comment on society, their social and political impact and role, comparisons with European/American/Japanese comics.
- ❖ Language: Slang in Middle Eastern countries: How to be funny and how to insult people – how is slang used in public discourse?
- ❖ Language: Understanding swearing. What is taboo and why? What does swearing tell us about a society or a segment of society?
- ❖ Politics: Non-violence as ideology. Do people believe in it after the Arab uprisings? Here, you can use Gene Sharp’s theory of nonviolent action as the point of departure, it makes for interesting case studies.
- ❖ Do Middle Eastern countries have a strategy for dealing with the youth bulge? Interviews with politicians and bureaucrats, or harvest texts from national media and analyze how the youth bulge is being discussed.
- ❖ Islamism: The strategy of the Muslim Brothers after the ill-fated democracy experiment in Egypt: a turn to violence yet again? Also possible to make a comparison between al-Nahda and MB in Egypt. Explore the inclusion-moderation thesis by Jillian Schwedler, which she developed largely based on the Muslim Brothers in Jordan.

- ❖ Islamism: How did the Salafi movement respond to the Arab uprisings and their aftermaths? This is interesting because Salafism used to be seen as quietist – non-political. In Egypt, for example, they quickly entered politics after 2011, but after the military coup they have struggled to navigate the new and changing political landscape.
- ❖ Culture: How are the Arab uprisings reflected in new literary production by young authors? The Arab uprisings were accompanied by a lot of writing and other cultural expressions (music, graffiti) by relatively young people. I know Egypt best, but there were things going on in Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon as well, possibly the Gulf. Not only novels, but short story collections, non-fiction, magazines, blogs or other electronic media. Did the upheavals leave any mark on the culture?

Senior Lecturer Dag Tuastad (updated Sep 2017):

Gender relations, waithood and marriage patterns

- ❖ Is there a change on gender relations going on in the Middle East, challenging old patriarchal values? The current generation of women has less children, higher education and higher labour participation rates. What is the impact on this on gender relations?
- ❖ Study changes and practices in relations between unmarried young males and females; dating, sexual relations etc.
- ❖ Study marriage patterns, changes over time, and how to cope with the challenges of high marriage costs.

Football culture and the political role of football:

- ❖ In authoritarian countries of the Middle East the football arena has become politicized. Football supporters across the region, mainly young men with political aspirations and frustrations, meet collectively during football matches, and articulate politicized messages.
- ❖ Pick a country, North Africa, the Levant, the Gulf – and follow how supporter groups – especially so-called ultras – challenge regimes and taboos during football matches.
- ❖ How is football used in nation building in weak states? Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen..

Tribal organization, “tribal” law and the role of kinship in politics

- ❖ Where local representation exists: How is local politics organized? What is the role of clans/families/tribes in local councils?
- ❖ In areas with low degree of state services: what is the role of kinship based networks in local social and political organization?
- ❖ In many areas of the Middle East a system of informal conflict resolution (sulha) exists side by side with public law. How does informal law (‘urf) works? What determines if a case is solved through informal law?

Professor Bernt Brendemoen (updated Sep 2017):

- ❖ The rhetorics of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: a textual analysis. This is an interesting topic having even greater actuality today than when it was first suggested, but should preferably be done by a student having Turkish as his/her mothertongue.
- ❖ The allegations against Orhan Pamuk about plagiarism, and his attitude towards plagiarism as such, linked to a survey of plagiarism in Ottoman and Republican Turkey.
- ❖ Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar as a source of inspiration to Orhan Pamuk
- ❖ Murathan Mungan's Authorship and his place within Turkish literature.
- ❖ Orhan Pamuk's novel “Snow” as a political novel.

- ❖ The political role of football in Turkey.
- ❖ The Ottoman linguistic and literary revival today as seen e.g. in the works of Ihsan Oktay Anar.: Is it a real revival or just an idiosyncratic phenomenon?
- ❖ The Turkish Alevi minority under the AKP rule: Have their specific rights increased or decreased? The attitude of the government to Alevism.

Associate Professor Kristin Soraya Batmanghelichi (updated October 2017)

- Gender Dynamics/Relations within Iran: Sexual Deviance or Political Protest?
- Contesting Arab and Iranian “Spring” Revolts
- Works of Gayatri Spivak
- Diaspora Politics among the Iranian Left: Leaving behind the Shah for the IRI (Islamic Republic of Iran)
- Asian Migrants in Iran during the Pahlavi Era: History and Context
- Surveying/Analyzing Iranian Intellectuals, Political Elites, and Middle Class Cultural Production
- Evolving Iranian Middle Classes in Post-Revolutionary Iran
- Graffiti Art among Iranian Youth
- Arab-Iranian Tensions after 2001
- Women’s Movement in Contemporary Iran
- Public Health Awareness in the face of STDs in MENA region
- Historicizing Morality Reform Programs of IRI
- The Dubai Connection: A Middleman’s Response to Sanctions
- IRI Social Movements (Labor, Women, Minority, Cyber)
- Western Brands in Iran
- Social History of 20th Century Iranian Revolutions
- BARJAM and its Discontents: Investigating Iranian Nuclear Diplomacy and the P5+1
- Iranian Cinema in a Global and/or Political Contexts
- Gender Politics and Sexuality in MENA region

Professor Brynjar Lia (updated Sep 2017):

The Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East:

- ❖ The early history of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: exploring new sources such as those available via www.ikhwanwiki.com.
- ❖ The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood after the 2013 military coup: to what degree has the suppression of the MB led to “radicalization”? To what degree is the “radicalization” a useful analytical tool in explaining MB’s post-2013 evolution?

Jihadism in the Middle East:

- ❖ Fieldwork on the Internet: explore benefits and drawbacks by using online sources in researching jihadi groups in the Arab world. Select a specific case study.
- ❖ Evolution of militant Islamism in Egypt after 1997: identify phases, how new groups differed from their predecessors, key events, etc.

- ❖ Why did jihadi groups proliferate in the Arab world after the Arab Spring? Choose one or two countries as empirical case studies.
- ❖ Rebel governance by Jihadi groups: case studies from Yemen, Iraq and Syria. Why do jihadi groups care about territorial control? How do they govern?
- ❖ (Rebel governance in the Middle East: The case of Palestinian and Kurdish insurgents. Historical or contemporary examples.)
- ❖ The Islamic State as a rebel group in a comparative perspective: unique or just another insurgent group?
- ❖ The rise (and fall?) of the Islamic State: explaining the underlying causes.

Renewable energy in the Middle East:

- ❖ Renewable energy programs in the Middle East: choose one or two countries and explore drivers and obstacles to the implementation of renewable energy projects.