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# Comment on Lama Abu-Odeh's *Islam in the Inter(National)*

Shadi Mokhtari\*

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Lama Abu-Odeh provides a fascinating sketch of the world we have come to inhabit since 9/11. She starts with the academic world and the two fields of “national security studies” and “Islamic studies”. Here she provides a number of critical observations. First, the national security field takes on a sanitized and purportedly neutral disposition towards Islam. Proof of its neutrality is demonstrated by simply not making any verbal reference to Islam or Muslims. Yet the fact that the field is constructed around the Muslim threat is impossible to miss. Those who belong to the field of Islamic Studies, on the other hand, want nothing to do with national security and instead to focus squarely on defining or dissecting or re-interpreting Islam, usually to make the point that Islam is (or can be) more liberal than it is portrayed to be. Both Islamists and the national security scholars who are troubled by the treatment of Muslims in the name of national security have an important blind spot: they fail to make key connections between American militarism and the focus of their scholarship. The Islamists are consumed by all things internal to Islam and the Muslim world. The national security scholars (or at least those with liberal leanings among them) are consumed by the denials of human rights and civil liberties but not as much by the immense suffering and injustice of imperial wars. They compartmentalize denials of individual rights and US military interventions. Abu-Odeh’s discussion alerts us to this inadequacy in the response from both fields.

Perhaps, the most important contribution Abu-Odeh makes in the paper is her insight that what is ultimately “absent in both fields is Muslims as agents of modern history”<sup>1</sup>. Nothing has brought to light the absence of “agency” afforded to Muslims after 9/11 (and long before) more than Egypt and Tunisia, and perhaps Iran in 2009. It is as if Muslims’ agency suddenly appeared out of nowhere in these events. In fact, although widely un-noticed in the United States, including by the academic fields mentioned by Abu-Odeh, during the post-9/11 era, Muslims repeatedly demonstrated their agency by mobilizing against and challenging American policies — its renditions, justifications and practices of torture, its indefinite detentions, its appropriations of human rights and democracy discourses and its military interventions in the region — all before Tahrir appears on American cable news outlets.

After noting this important point that both prominent post-9/11 fields of inquiry overlooked, Muslims’ agency, Professor Abu Odeh takes the argument further. She maintains that while both fields are preoccupied with endowing Islam with liberalism, what is really of significance, and yet is also denied to Muslims, is *their* National Security. Here again, she makes a number of very apt observations on how American national security is constructed as the only national security that matters, the missing element of nationhood in many Muslim contexts, its colonial roots and its entrenchment through international law.

While the proposition that national security does not belong to the United States or West alone is a fascinating point that many of us may be embarrassed to admit forces us towards new conceptual frames, it gives rise to a number of questions. Abu-Odeh’s assertion that Muslims should be able to define the contours of what constitutes national security for themselves is well taken. Yet Professor Abu-Odeh does not offer even a broad definition of

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1. Lama Abu-Odeh, *Islam In the Inter(National)* 10 SANTA CLARA J. INT’L L. 205 (2012).

national security that can help us to shed light on her argument. What does the term mean beyond the American/Western definition that has prevailed since 9/11? Why is it “that thing that is most valuable to it in modern history”?<sup>2</sup> It is not clear why Muslims’ aspirations can be captured in the notion of national security and why we should not conceptualize Muslim aspirations in other terms, for example, self-determination or human security? It is worth noting that over the last ten years Muslims have been more apt to take exception with the “national security” mantra and its Western excesses than to invoke it as a term that captures their individual, societal or national aspirations.

Abu-Odeh also argues that while it is nice to have liberalism, it is nicer to have national security. Here I wonder if Professor Abu-Odeh is too quick in dismissing liberalism and the extent to which it can manifest through Muslim agency? In the post 9/11 era not only do Muslims display agency, they are agents promoting liberalism. This is not through the liberal interpretations of Islam of the Islamicists, but through their indictments of the United States’ post-9/11 denials of rights and dignity and orchestration of devastating wars. Muslims not only understand liberalism, they adroitly deploy it against the hegemony who intervenes in the name of liberalism. Isn’t liberalism deployed in this way, also a path to not only being endowed with, but also claiming, national will? Can we argue that this is precisely what Egyptians have done? Not only have they challenged Hosni Mubarak, the dictator, but they have also challenged the United States, the patron purporting liberalism? Further, is the concern here more with the agency of Muslims or the agency of the nation-state? Abu-Odeh seems to conflate the two, and I would disagree with that, citing Iran as an example in which there is nation-statehood, but the opposite of the national will in place.

Further, under Professor Abu-Odeh’s formulation, the lack of national security stems from the lack of nationhood. Is the only solution to the lack of national security thus the undoing of the fragmentation of the colonial drawing board? If so, how practical or attainable a solution is this? More importantly, is that what the Arab populations to which she refers truly aspire? While the Arab Spring demonstrates exceptional Arab solidarity, it can hardly be characterized as a pan-Arab revival. Perhaps a liberalism emerging out of the Muslim experience (and in concert with other notions, such as social justice) provides a more attainable/immediate path to at least some of the tenets of what seems to be Abu-Odeh’s notion of national security, namely challenging the encroachment of empire and upholding Muslim agency.

In the final analysis, Professor Abu-Odeh’s work might have been two separate papers: one that provides a piercing critique of the treatment of Muslims and Muslim agency by a set of academic fields that flourished in the post-9/11 era and one that locates the lack of agency accorded to Muslims in the denial of nation statehood and, in particular, national security. I find the former highly compelling and the latter in need of further development and justification.

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2. *Id.*