

# Beyond trauma, beyond humanitarianism, beyond empathy: A commentary

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## Abstract

The authors of this Special Section invite us to consider what it means to go beyond the common trope of ‘trauma’ in conceptualizing events in the Middle East. Considering the question in relation to these contributions, I ask: is trauma a concept with sharp edges or a word at hand saturated with context that grows out of the experience of life and its many dissolutions? Together, this collection challenges the reader to think further about a family of concepts that might be honed out of the experience of survivors. It also calls for rethinking the idea of the Middle East itself as a region from which we could get an opening into different ways of showing what it is to be a chronicler of how life is being remade.

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In my 2015 seminar on violence and non-violence, the four undergraduate students signed up for the class were a little surprised that I began with a discussion on American humor after 9/11. I could think of no better way to stop the automatic rush of thoughts that come with the mention of terms such as ‘9/11’, ‘axis of evil’, or even ‘the Middle East’. In discussing how the media shapes our world and the way we live in it, the anthropologist and cultural critic Thomas de Zengotita (2006, 170) writes in an ironic tone: “The vaunted “wisdom of the American people” – even more vaunted than Iraq’s Republican Guard – is the more to be cherished for being theirs by definition, effortlessly acquired, no tedious

study, no demanding ethical reflection required, yet another convenience in a convenient world'. While his sarcasm resonates with fleeting thoughts of my own when I read or hear platitudes about the 'culture of violence' or the 'clash of civilizations' – it also jars against my sensibility of trying to find a voice in which criticism is not so dependent on indignation alone.

It is in this spirit that I find a companionship with the authors featured in this Special Section of *MAT*, who invite us to consider what it means to go beyond the common trope of 'trauma' in conceptualizing events in the Middle East, even as we put this trope under question. This is not to criticize indignation, as if those who continue to suffer from the brutality of these wars and occupations have an obligation to be more reasonable than anyone else, but rather to recognize the power of thinking otherwise.

As in many other regions in which national boundaries were a result of colonial interventions, the term 'Middle East' is not a simple neutral term – it bears traces of its military origins. As Marshall Hodgson (1963), among other scholars (Hourani 1991; Issawi 1980), has argued forcefully, one cannot simply take the present territorial boundaries as the units for narrating the history of the specific spatial configurations in the region. If we then accept that from the start these units were indeterminate categories, more useful for providing a critical analytical framework than marking off spatially distinct social formations (Sinha 2013), then what challenge to thought have the authors of this special issue identified and what critical responses do they offer?

First, as the title 'Beyond Trauma' signals powerfully, the authors featured here want to loosen the overdetermined connection made between the experiences of war, continuous occupation, displacement and countless other assaults on everyday life, and the proliferation of discursive and nondiscursive forms in which international humanitarian interventions come to focus on trauma as the dominant trope for representing the consequences of these violations. Second, while one might legitimately do a genealogical analysis of the term 'Middle East' or show its 'constructed' character, it is much more instructive to see the nodes of connection that have emerged in the region precisely in tandem with geopolitical developments, including war, occupation, and the rise and fall of authoritarian and democratic regimes.

Recent critiques of international humanitarianism have been quite effective in making available the idea that the centrality of trauma and the recognition accorded to PTSD as a diagnostic category (DSM-III 1981) serve to authorize specific ways in which the suffering of war and occupation can be given expression, while simultaneously putting under suspicion other ways of speaking of violence. This is not a matter of expert versus folk discourses – as if suffering could be neatly partitioned between a modern form and a

traditional one – but rather of what Asad (2002) calls ‘strong languages’ that wield power to organize, of what Jacques Rancière (2006) tells us is the arrangement of the seen and the unseen or the organization of the sensible. Yet in many ways, the papers gathered here push what I would call the ‘unthought’ of politics even further.

Consider the contribution by Hanna Kienzler and Zeina Amro on mental health system reform in the West Bank. The authors make the astute point that population has emerged as an important object for mental health intervention in global programming and, that when applied to situations of war or genocide, there is an additional assumption that emergency measures to provide therapy must be taken. However, I think that the shift from the individual patient to the population allows another shift to the assumption that everything from severe mental disorders to common mental disorders can be treated with drugs for depression or anxiety in a primary care setting without the need for close clinical supervision. Further, it is taken for granted that we can separate a discrete entity called ‘mental illness’ from the general conditions of severe poverty or from the continuous disruption of ordinary life. And, as Lamia Moghnieh (2014) stated in her presentation at the workshop with great clarity, wars do not always produce trauma of the sort that diagnostic manuals recognize and, even more significantly, ways of suffering become part of the rhetoric of war itself.

Moghnieh touches on a much wider problematic that goes beyond the specific case of countries in the Middle East to ask: how do categories such as PTSD become part of political negotiations over what form expressions of suffering have to take to be acknowledged and domesticated, as accounts of suffering move from the private into the public domain? As Allan Young (1997) argues in his brilliant book on PTSD, consolidation of this diagnostic category in the context of the critiques of the Vietnam War allowed the United States to bypass the question of what bearing revelations of war atrocities would have on the treatment of war veterans. Were they heroes to be valorized for their sacrifices for the nation, or war criminals who had violated wartime laws? By recasting the conditions of veterans as cases of mental illness, it became possible to overcome a political impasse. The issue here is not whether PTSD is real or not, but what forms do the relations among politics, law, and psychiatry take in different time-space configurations?

In the converse case – when trauma is not found where it is expected to be – its very absence morphs into a form of symbolic capital, as in claims made by Hezbollah about the resilience of the population in Lebanon in the context of multiple wars, or the frequently

evoked virtue of *sumud*, endurance, among Palestinians under occupation.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the claims over resilience and tough masculinity notwithstanding, there is spoken and unspoken suffering among those who survive and live in the shadow of these wars, not only resulting from Israeli aggression, but also from the restrictions on citizenship imposed on Palestinian or Iraqi or Syrian refugees by various Arab countries.

We might ask: is trauma one thing – a concept with hard boundaries – or is it a malleable category that becomes saturated with context? If we are to train our eyes to look and see what is happening between the crevices of the hard discourses on trauma, it changes shape as we follow the labor performed by various Palestinian therapists, NGOs, or human rights workers in Palestine. These local workers do participate in the humanitarian therapeutic interventions, whether as physicians, mental health specialists, or NGO staff, and pragmatically use what resources become available through international NGOs. One of the important points made by Palestinian scholars such as Sa'ed Atshan who speak from the on-the-ground realities of life in the occupied territories, is that people invest time and labor in these interventions because they find moments of hope in these institutional resources.<sup>2</sup> Thus, although people are indeed interpellated by the categories of classification with which they are confronted, they are not entirely remade into the identities imposed by these categories. I do not deny the great contribution of Michel Foucault (2005) as he asks us to consider how we are invited or incited to become a subject, and that of Ian Hacking (1998) who shows that there are ecological niches that allow a particular disease category to emerge at any time, but, as I have argued elsewhere, subjectivity is not determined completely by these modes of subjectivation (see Das 2015).<sup>3</sup> These arguments do not take away from the force of criticisms against sentimental humanitarianism but they do try to show the different social life of humanitarian aid.

In the hands of bureaucrats reviewing cases for asylum, the presence or absence of trauma as determined by the application of medical diagnostic criteria can be used as a tool for exclusion as immigration officers separate the 'genuine' victims from the so-called frauds; it can serve to stage a contest over the masculinity and relative resilience of one set of fighters

1 The category of *sumud* is frequently politicized as in pressure to control unruly emotions, as shown by Segal (2015) in her work on the wives of Palestinian men imprisoned by Israel and the burden they bear of displaying continued attachment and fidelity both to the men and the Palestinian project.

2 See especially Atshan 2013.

3 I will forego further elaboration of this point here but I simply wish to flag the fact that Hacking does realize that his earlier work on assuming that social classifications have a decisive impact on the shaping of subjectivity was in need of more nuanced understanding of this relationship (see Hacking 1999 and 2004).

over another as in the claims and counterclaims of Hamas and Israeli right; it can be a language of compassion; and it can be a diagnostic tool to treat a mental disorder. Together, this collection of articles challenges the reader to think further about what we might consider a family of concepts to be honed out of the experience of survivors, rather than assuming that a universal diagnostic category is adequate for the complex experience of loss, mourning, and aspirations for remaking a life even within these spaces of devastation (see Das 2007).

Omar Dewachi's article, presented through the story of Hussein, is helpful in clarifying these issues further. Hussein is an Iraqi refugee in Beirut, a certified trauma victim registered with the UN and in the process of being resettled in the United States. Dewachi invites us to move from the notion of a scar (with its assumption of an injury that is healed though its mark remains visible) to a wound that can open up at any time. Dewachi writes, 'Following Julie Livingston's (2013) insights into the social nature of bodily affliction, I ask: what is revealed in these wounds that travel, these wounds that enter new social worlds and multiple histories of violence? Unraveling the articulations of wounds and their histories may help us better understand the material and social vulnerabilities of afflicted lives and bodies under war, and their entanglement in the ongoing reconfigurations of borders across states and communities in the Middle East'. Like Vincent Crapanzano (2011), who used the notion of the wound to capture the social dissonances among the Harkis, a group of Algerians who fought with the French colonizers against their own people during the Algerian war of independence, Dewachi is interested in showing how the social wound creates dissonance in relationships. However, while Crapanzano seeks to show the dissonance created in the relations between kin and between generations, Dewachi shows how the figure of the victim is very difficult to absorb even at the level of impersonal relations at the site of work. The same person who has elicited sympathy because of his past experiences of brutality becomes a figure of suspicion because he tries to use his wound in an instrumental way to resettle himself in the United States.

Like the other authors in this collection, Dewachi is not committed to seeing the figure of the Palestinian or the Iraqi or Afghan refugee through the lens of the 'innocent victim' – instead they ask us to consider why there should be any stake in questions of innocence at all. With great insight, Dewachi argues that we need to think of the conditions of possibility in which multiple displacements and the efforts to deal with economies of triage and demands for evidence that one has suffered do not even allow scars to form. Should one then think more deeply of how people move between different subject positions and embody different ways in which past experiences can be converted into the currency with which they can buy the right to move elsewhere? And how can such strategies for survival be turned back to understand the 'unthought' of politics?

Finally, one wants to think of the literary as the mode through which the rules of what can be said or not said are altered. If politics and organized religion are suspicious of the literary, it is because of its power to make things sensible – to give us a language that can make the singularity of our experience count as also a way of making the plight of the collective public. In her excellent contribution on the poetry of exile created by young Afghan refugees living in Iran, Zuzanna Olszewska states her problematic in the following terms: ‘For Afghan refugee poets, poetry was a way of making a statement about collective suffering and speaking on behalf of others less able to raise their voices. But it was also frequently a personal cry of pain: it was often mirrored by profoundly negative affects experienced on the individual level’.

As Olszewska points out, thinking of these ‘negative affects’ is not an easy matter. Poetry in the Persianate culture shared by Afghanistan, Iran, and Urdu-speaking South Asia is suffused with a certain melancholy that finds expression in longing, loss, grieving. Yet the poets Olszewska studied also felt that they were ‘depressed’. Are languages of sadness within the genre of poetry then commensurate with notions of depression? Olszewska is clear that she is not talking about depression as a clinical category, yet one wonders: how has the proliferation of this psychological vocabulary recast the experience of loss? In the years I was growing up in a *basti* (a low-income neighborhood, but not officially a slum) in Delhi, one of my great pleasures was to go to an all-night *mushaira* (public recitation of poetry) when I could persuade my brother to chaperone me. There I would find that people who were stern uncles and aunts in the daytime would become lost in Urdu poetry and reveal an aspect of themselves not visible during the harsh conditions of the day. Yet sadness was not then translated simply as depression. I wonder if the proliferation of trauma discourses has given an alternate language to the Afghan refugees who write poetry but also, perhaps not finding the audiences for it, translate the experience of writing into depression. Or have the experiences of poetry itself shrunk in the absence of those who could receive it not necessarily as lasting or great poetry but as the ephemeral passing moments that allowed some kind of communion and pleasure to occur?

In conclusion, I would like to call for rethinking the idea of the Middle East itself as a region that might provide an opening into different ways of showing what it is to be a chronicler of how life is being remade. To have the courage to ask for attention to the gender-based violence perpetrated by ISIS in their territories of control, as Nadjie Al-Ali (2014) and Rita Giacaman (2014) did in our workshop in London, to rage against the wanton destruction of lives in the intensity of the violence perpetrated on Gaza in 2014 by Israel. By doing this, we step away from the fruitless discussion about whether these events are commensurable, and instead widen the scope of the question: what does it mean to be responsible to the present? For the courage of these questions, and the lucidity of the writings, I am indebted to the

scholars featured in this Special Section of *MAT* and to Orkideh Behrouzan for being the catalyst for these discussions.

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