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When we decided to reestablish the *Journal of Associated Graduates in Near Eastern Studies*, which had been active as a print journal during the 1990s until 2008, we believed that an online platform would offer graduate students a chance to explore new directions both in their field of research and in the ways they approach publication. As students ourselves, we understand both the vital need for graduate students to have an outlet for innovative writing and research. Thus, in our re-launch, we aimed to provide such a space for those students who work outside the standard frameworks of academic writing, who want to widen the field of existing approaches, and who consider their work to fall just between the various field-specific journals that exist.

In the process of planning for the first re-issue of a journal that had fallen on hard times, we were also in the midst of what seemed unprecedented and rapid change. In the United States, the news cycle was dominated by stories of the rise in the number of mass shootings and the devastation of unmitigated climate change—forest fires not far from our university campus, the increasing strength of hurricanes in the Caribbean. Elsewhere reports of genocide and continued civil unrest. Now as we launch this issue, amid a global pandemic, increasing police brutality, emboldened fascist rhetoric, and worsening climate catastrophes, we feel the theme of our first issue to be more relevant than ever.

Just as past crises have occurred throughout history, our current era seems defined by its own diverse conditions of adversity. From our perspective as students and scholars of the Near East, hard times have become an uncritical staple of contemporary discourse regarding the Middle East – the news often portrays the Middle East as a difficult place, defined by its hardships and catastrophes. In our call for papers, we emphasized that we were searching for research that complicates this narrative by considering it from a diverse array of critical perspectives. The two papers published in our first re-issue, offer such perspectives.

Rachel Winter's contribution to this issue, "I Have a Story, Too: Suicide Bombers, Borders, & Peripheral Narratives" counterposes the narratives of suicide bombings constructed by the news media to those offered by the artists she examines. Winter diversifies this perspective further by looking into representations of female suicide bombers, and the different gendered narratives that motivate their representation in the media. She offers the archetypes that package these suicide bombers, inflecting the Jungian archetypes with the mythical bent of the "Female Monster" and "Woman Warrior." What comes under scrutiny is not merely the representation of the suicide bomber by the artwork, but also its framing. Winter asks, "What is the viewer to make of the title, "Snow White"?" The fairytale is the framework around which the suicide bomber can be made familiar to the audience and Winter's paper puts pressure on the desire to repackage the suicide bomber's experience through a Western framework.

In his contribution, “Homebound Travelers: The Return's Destabilization of Homeland in Arabic literature,” Shawheen Rezaei sheds light on the shattered perspective of “the return.” In his reading of the *rihla* Rezaei focuses on the way it disorients the traveler—both the character and the reader. Rezaei’s article suggests that we consider how our perspective as readers is similarly complicated in our reading of this genre. In the novels he examines, the question of the traveler’s encounter with the other is nuanced both by the other that the traveler encounters abroad and the other that he encounters once he returns home. When the traveler returns as an outsider, we are forced to question whether there can really be a return. Ultimately in asking what it means to return, the works that Rezaei reads force us to consider if any return is possible.

Finally, in our interview with Mohammad Rafi, we discuss the implications of uncovering these critical perspectives. Throughout our conversation, Rafi’s work which attends to configurations of nationalism and transculturalism, and particularly centers on the question of Aryanism within Persian Studies, anchored us as we considered debates over freedom of speech, the limits of academic attention—especially in the field of Critical Theory—to non-Eurocentric paradigms, and pedagogies of activism and critique. Rafi’s work between Europe and Iran reveals the importance of engaging in this kind of interdisciplinary research not merely because it exposes the limits of academic engagement, but also for its clear urgency beyond the academic context.

The *Hard Times* conference and this publication would not have been possible without the support and sponsorship of certain people. First, we would like to thank the UC Berkeley Center for Middle East Studies for allowing us to hold the conference in their space and for all of their support during the conference. We are especially grateful to Mary Matambanadzo and Julia Choucair-Vizoso who worked with us to plan the conference.

We would also like to thank our home department, Near Eastern Studies. Professor Niek Veldhuis, who is the Faculty Advisor for *JAGNES*, has provided guidance throughout the process of re-establishing the journal, as well as planning the conference from start to finish in one academic year. We are also appreciative of the support of the Near Eastern Studies staff: Shorena Kurtsikidze, Sharlene Mulder, Rania Shah, and Deanna Kiser-Go.

We would also like to thank both the Townsend Center and the Graduate Assembly for the grants we received to pursue the publication of our first issue.

Finally, we would also like to thank the other conference committee members who all put so much time into planning the *Hard Times* conference: Oren Yirmiya, Linda Istanbuli, Ayelet Evan-Nur, Aria Fani, and to Terri Tanaka who mentored us as we set about planning our first conference.

Our mission at *JAGNES* is to facilitate the interdisciplinary and continued study of the Near East and to promote unconventional and nontraditional approaches and methodologies within the field of Near Eastern Studies. We hope to include in our journal the future of the discipline—whether that future is in new historiographies of the region, new technologies of reconstruction, or innovative forms of academic writing.

Sincerely,

Brooke Norton & Lubna Safi