

Can Freedom Be Unlimited?  
Examples of Censorship in  
Middle Eastern Societies in the  
19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries

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# Introduction

*Stephan Conermann*

This volume of edited articles presents the scholarly results of a German-Arab partnership project, funded for a two-year period by the German Academic Exchange Service (2013–2014). The idea was to establish a working relationship between the Higher Institute for Arts Criticism at the Academy of Arts in Egypt (later: the Centre for Civilization Studies and Dialogue of Cultures at Cairo University) and the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Bonn University. The scientific focus was on the dynamics of dissidence and censorship in Egypt from the *Nahḍa* to the Arab Spring. Under the leadership of Dr. Haggag Ali (Cairo) and Prof. Dr. Stephan Conermann (and later Prof. Dr. Christine Schirmacher as well) (Bonn), an interdisciplinary group of young researchers was established. These scholars presented and discussed individual projects and relevant topics during three productive and successful workshops. It was these workshops that eventually led to this joint publication.

Many different authors contributed to this volume. Focusing on the conceptual problems of freedom of religion, freedom of belief and censorship, Christine SCHIRRMACHER highlights the different shifts in conceptualizing freedom in Near Eastern societies during the twentieth century. A term for freedom as a political concept does not exist in the literature of the classical period, and early Islamic jurisprudence also did not discuss this term in any great detail. The Arabic word for freedom, *ḥurriyya*, was essentially reduced to the question of serfdom. Up to the nineteenth century, the Arab concept of freedom retained a largely legal connotation in the political realm, while representatives of theology interpreted it as dependence upon God. Intellectuals predominantly mistrusted the concept of freedom, rarely focusing on freedom of the individual. When they did do so, early references to the term *ḥurriyya* at the end of the eighteenth century were largely and negatively imbued as synonyms for anarchy, libertinism, licentiousness and moral unrestraint. This fundamentally changed, however, during the transition to modernity, when the term *ḥurriyya* received new meaning through the reception of socio-political concepts from European states. Up to the middle of the twentieth century, many European political notions were discussed in the

publications of Arab societies, and by the end of the century, these notions were firmly rooted in Arabic terminology. While several Arab intellectuals defined freedom as an inalienable right of the individual, protected by civil rights, the majority continued to interpret freedom politically and in a collectivist sense. This idea of collectivity remains a major theme in the modern debate on freedom of religion, belief and opinion. Schirmmacher differentiates between three positions among present-day scholars regarding freedom of religion: a liberal, a moderate and a restrictive position. A minority of scholars are at the two extremes of the pendulum, arguing either for a liberal, free choice of faith or stating that religious freedom consists exclusively of either belonging to Islam, the one true religion, or in converting to it. The majority of scholars, however, follow a moderately restrictive position, confirming the historically vested right of non-Muslims – Jews and Christians in particular – to not have to convert to Islam. They define religious freedom for Muslims exclusively as freedom of thought, which at most allows Muslims to question bear doubts about Islam in private. However, according to this opinion, whoever propagates deviating notions is guilty of apostasy and, for that reason, must be punished. As a result, the propagated idea of freedom is divided into a twofold framework: an allowed internal deviation from the majority opinion, for which freedom of belief exists, and an external affiliation with a religious community with no free choice for adherents of Islam, i.e., no religious freedom. The discursive focus lies not on the individual and his interests but on the collective, which is alleged to be pre-eminently protected from dangerous influences. As a consequence, the limitations of the freedom of religion are not interpreted as censorship, oppression or prohibition against a desirable freedom but rather as a necessary defense against the destruction of society. Based on this, Schirmmacher argues that if complete religious freedom is seen a synonym for freedom, its limitation in numerous Middle Eastern states can be interpreted as forms of censorship, as it prohibits free choice to express personally chosen worldviews. This censorship rarely occurs by means of legal texts or by political elites, but instead through the intermediation of social norms by notable theologians or places of scholarship. This leads to a paradoxical situation in which most constitutions of Arab states explicitly award the right to religious freedom, but do not offer comprehensive religious freedom in all directions.

In the following article, Emad ABOU-GHAZI provides a broad historical overview of the development of modern censorship in Egypt from the nineteenth century until 1952. The modernization of Egypt in the first part of the



## Contributors

**Emad Abou-Ghazi** is an Egyptian historian and archivist, who has been born in Cairo January 3, 1955. He is the former Minister of Culture and presently Professor of Arabic Medieval Documents at the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University. He has received his BA in History at the Faculty of Arts at the Cairo University in 1976, his Diploma in Modern History at the Institute of Arab Research and Studies in 1980 and his Diploma in Archives and Documents at the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University in 1982, where he also had received his MA in 1988 and his PhD in Arabic Medieval Documents in 1995.

**Haggag Ali** is an assistant professor in critical theory at the Academy of Arts in Egypt. His publications include *Mapping the Secular Mind: Modernity's Quest for a Godless Utopia* (London & Washington, 2013), and his Arabic translations include Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cairo, 2014), and *Liquid Modernity* (Beirut, 2016). Dr. Ali had postdoctoral fellowships at Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Humboldt University of Berlin, and the University of London. He was a junior research group leader of 'Dissidence and Censorship in Modern Egypt', an interdisciplinary joint research project at Cairo University and Bonn University, funded by DAAD within the Arab German Transformation Partnership under the supervision of Prof. Stephan Conermann and Prof. Christine Schirmmacher. Dr. Ali's current research focuses on the Egyptian reception of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

**Hayrettin Aydın** has studied history and turkology at the University of Hamburg, where he received his master of arts (M.A.). He worked at different universities in Germany (Hamburg, Kiel, Essen, Bremen) as lecturer on Ottoman and the history of modern Turkey, on modern Turkish, Ottoman Turkish as well as on migration issues and the situation and status of Muslims in Germany. From 2012–2014 he was lecturer on modern Turkish and Ottoman Turkish at the University of Bonn. From 2014–2015 he was fellow at the Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg at the University of Bonn, where he worked on Mamluk studies in Turkey. His research focus lies on the reform process in later Ottoman history, especially on legal reforms. Currently he is a working as a free-lance lecturer.

**Stephan Conermann** is Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn/Germany since 2003. He has served as Vice Dean of Research and International Relations of the Faculty of Humanities at Bonn University (2008–2010), and Speaker of the Bonn Asia Center (since 2008), the Bonn Center for Transcultural Narratology (BZTN, since 2009), and the Bonn International Graduate School of Oriental and Asian Studies (BIGS-OAS, 2010–2015). At the moment, he holds the position of Vice-President for International Affairs of the University of Bonn. He studied Ancient, Early Modern, Modern and Asian History, as well as Slavic and Oriental Philology, at the University of Kiel, and took multiple language courses and study visits in Beirut/Lebanon, Damascus/Syria, Moscow/Russia, and Poznan/Poland. He did his doctoral studies at the Department of Oriental Studies at Kiel University from 1992 till 1996, and was afterwards a Research Assistant and Assistant Professor until 2003.

**Sarah Dusend** holds an MA in Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and French Language and Literature from the University of Bonn and studied Arabic and Persian at the *Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales* in Paris. Her master thesis was dealing with the second eastern women's congress of 1932 in Tehran. She worked as a coordinator for the *Bonner Asienzentrum* (2009–2013) and the *Bonn International Graduate School – Oriental and Asian Studies* (2013–2015). Currently she is a research fellow at the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn funded by the *German Research Foundation* (DFG). She is writing her PhD on three pilgrimage reports written by Qajar women at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to her research in the fields of women's studies and travel writing in the Iranian and Arab world as well as mobility and pilgrimage in Islamic cultures, her interest is in Afghan and Pakistani contemporary historiography and identity politics.

**Patrick Kane** is Lead Instructor of History at the Sharjah Higher Colleges of Technology in the United Arab Emirates. Author of *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt: Aesthetics, Ideology and Nation-building* (I.B. Tauris, 2012), he received his Ph.D. in the Philosophy, Interpretation and Culture program at Binghamton University, State University of New York. He also studied Art History at the University of Victoria and received his M.A. in history and a B.A. in Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Currently he is researching the irruption of modern world system and capitalism on the

culture of the Arab Mashreq and Gulf society from the late Ottoman period into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is also researching a comparative history of forced migration and reconstruction after war and disaster from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that compares cities in Ireland and the Southern U.S. He is also a contributing author for various publications of the Sharjah Art Museum, the Sharjah Art Foundation, Barjeel Art Foundation and other art institutions in the Gulf region.

**Carsten Polanz** has studied “Islamwissenschaft” (Islamic Studies), Modern History and Public Law at Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Bonn. He has received his PhD in 2016 with a thesis on Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī’s multidimensional concept of Jihād. Since 2009 Carsten Polanz is editor of the bilingual journal “Islam und christlicher Glaube/Islam and Christianity” and teaching in different government and church institutions. Since 2016 he is also lecturer in “Islamwissenschaft” (Islamic Studies) at Freie Theologische Hochschule in Gießen (Gießen School of Theology). His research focuses on current movements of political and militant Islam, contemporary Islamic discourses on human rights and religious freedom as well as theological key issues of Christian-Islamic dialogue and controversies.

**Inas Saleh** is a PhD candidate at the Academy of Arts at the University of Leipzig in the field of Translation Studies and Comparative Literature. She works as an assistant lecturer at the Academy of Arts at the centre for languages and translation (German Department) and has translated German texts from Christoph Peters, Elias Canetti and Peter Zadek into Arabic. Her research focuses on the dynamics of translation as well as on women in literature, e. g. the Arabic woman in German literature. Inas Saleh has received her MA in the field of “Germanistik”, focusing on the Austrian Drama and the works of Elias Canetti. In her PhD thesis she is working on Dramatic writings of Gerlind Reinshagen.

**Christine Schirmacher** (MA; PhD) currently teaches as professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn/Germany and the Evangelical Theological Faculty (ETF) Leuven/Belgium. She is also engaged with teaching at different government institutions and continuing education programs related to politics. She is a member of the „Academic Advisory Council of the Federal Agency for Civic Education“ (Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung/BpB) appointed by the German Federal Minister of

the Interior and she is also member of the „Advisory Board of the German Institute for Human Rights“ (Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte/DIMR), Berlin. Her research interests are transformation processes of culture, society, law and theology in the Middle East in the 19th and 20th century, Islam in Germany and Europe, Sharia law and women’s, human’s and minorities’ rights.