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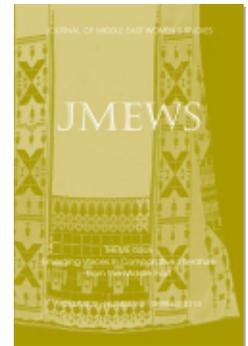
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## **Consuming Desires: Family Crisis and the State in the Middle East by Frances S. Hasso (review)**

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## **Consuming Desires: Family Crisis and the State in the Middle East**

Frances S. Hasso. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.  
256 pages. ISBN 978-0-8047-6156-7.

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Conducting research on near-taboo topics can be problematic in any academic discipline. For those performing ethnographic studies by researching alternative marriages in the Middle East, the process of procuring interviews must pose a similar challenge. Frances Hasso undertakes this endeavor in *Consuming Desires: Family Crisis and the State in the Middle East*, in which she examines the emergence of unconventional marriages in contemporary Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Hasso also assesses the states' contributions and responses to the ensuing so-called family crisis dialogue and addresses changes in

women's constructions and perceptions of gender. Other sources include government-sponsored reports, non-profit studies, newspaper articles, and television programs.

Hasso's multi-faceted thesis builds on scholarship that demonstrates how codifications of Muslim family law have increased male privileges by often selecting the most patriarchal doctrines while mentioning important gains for women in recent laws. Whereas divorce in the late Ottoman period had little stigma attached to it and remarriage was easy, it is now far more difficult for women to remarry in Egypt and the UAE. This also explains in part higher rates of polygamy in the contemporary UAE. Moreover, Hasso discusses the range of judicial practices used in both states pre-codification; in contrast, judges have less flexibility in their rulings and women have less agency today.

Providing a Foucaultian framework for the emergence of secret marriages, Hasso characterizes state codification of family law and response to unconventional marriages as manifestations of state authority, or what Michel Foucault terms "the exercise of power" (*Critical Inquiry*, 1982). Codification in this context becomes a mechanism of state control over people's everyday lives. Hasso expands on this framework, arguing that codification has tended to perpetuate a patriarchal system, one in which women are made dependent on the state, rather than one in which women's interests and independence are promoted. Through the Foucaultian lens, Hasso depicts both the Emirati and Egyptian states' codifications and actions and describes their contemporary family law systems and reforms, but she is unable to offer clear alternatives or solutions. Women must rely on some authority to protect and enforce their rights—what alternative do women have to the state?

Hasso maintains that codifications of family law, which have institutionalized gender inequality, have contributed to an increase in 'urfi and other unconventional marriage practices. 'Urfi marriages are unregistered with the state and are often short-term and secret. They do not require parental consent, and husbands have no maintenance or housing obligations. Other reasons for rising 'urfi rates include family control over marriage and women's changing expectations of marriage due to increased rates of higher education.

The increases in 'urfi marriage and divorce rates have led to what Hasso terms "family crisis discourse" (13), in which both states and

citizens participate. Often blaming the intrusion of Western culture and new communications technology, these concerns give states reason to attempt to end this perceived disintegration of Muslim values, but state interventions tend to make women more dependent on the state and reinforce patriarchy. Adding to family crisis discussions in the UAE is anxiety about maintaining the citizenship status quo for its majority population of non-citizen workers. Increasingly discriminatory citizenship laws that restrict Emirati women, but not men, from marrying non-citizens, are one example of patriarchal state policies that unintentionally propel women toward 'urfi marriage.

Hasso is most convincing in her argument that unconventional marriage trends cannot be explained by economic reasons alone. There are a number of other factors to be considered, such as parental control over the marriage process, restrictions on sex outside of marriage, and the gender inequality entrenched in policy and family laws. While acknowledging that marriage has become more expensive, Hasso points to the inherently unequal gender structure that modern law codes have cemented, in which men are constructed as providers and guardians of the family and women as obedient, kept, and responsible for the home, whether or not they work outside it as well. Is it then surprising that many women choose to bypass the authority of the state and family? Hasso also contends that women's expectations for what constitutes husband material have risen as their higher education rates have exceeded men's, particularly in the UAE. When such expectations cannot be met, women are turning to 'urfi or delaying marriage.

The norm-defying nature of Hasso's research makes substantiating her claims difficult, which she acknowledges in the introduction (22). For example, Hasso writes that Egyptian men are "divided between those desiring to marry educated or employed women who can contribute to maintaining the household and those who want to marry women who are younger or less educated... perceived to be more pliable" (123). This may well be the case, but Hasso cites this claim with a single group interview that included all of three men (108). I also question Hasso's assumption that women are newly concerned about balancing a career and the possibility of her husband treating her unkindly or "oppressively" (125). Are these worries really new phenomena? While it is logical to connect women's decisions to delay marriage or engage in secret

marriage to these concerns, this claim is supported by just one interview.

Ultimately, *Consuming Desires* is an informative, engaging, and important contribution to scholarship on gender and Muslim family law. Specialists of these topics as well as human rights advocates will find a great deal to interest them. Hasso provides a starting point for further studies on alternative marriage practices, raising a number of important issues that need additional research.

Hasso begins and ends her book with a highly publicized 'urfi-related paternity lawsuit in an interesting contrast to the way 'urfi marriages are usually secret, perhaps optimistically alluding to the potential for change and how attitudes are already shifting. There has been a great deal of change occurring in the Middle East since Hasso published *Consuming Desires*, and it is hard to resist contemplating what ramifications the Arab Spring revolutions might have in the realm of women's rights and status in family law. Perhaps far-reaching reform will be more possible than ever before, once states are forced to be responsive to the needs and desires of their whole populations.