Introducing
Alexandra Blackman

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Alexandra's research interests include the relationship between political regimes and religious institutions, as well as the development of and appeal to religious identities in the political sphere. Her research is motivated by a broader interest in the politics of the Middle East, including gender, political party development, the evolution of authoritarian institutions, and the role of foreign and transnational forces in the region. She has conducted research in Egypt, France, Tunisia, and the US, with pending projects in Syria.

Your work often explores how political regimes interact with religious institutions, particularly in the Middle East. Could you discuss how your current book project on French colonial influence in Tunisia has shaped your understanding of political identity formation in post-colonial contexts, and what implications this research has for contemporary politics in the region?

My book project examines the colonial roots of the Islamist-secular cleavage in North Africa, with a particular focus on Tunisia. I argue that the divided educational systems that are part of many settler colonial contexts can contribute to the formation of deep divides over ideas of the state and over the relationship between the state and religious institutions. Thus, the differential provision of French and Islamic education as a result of local colonial experience shapes variation in secularist and Islamist political identities and, accordingly, the social and geographic bases of the Islamist-secular cleavage.

In terms of political identity, this work emphasizes key differences in secular and Islamist ideas about the state, and distinguishes Islamist and secular ideologies from personal piety. More broadly, this work suggests that the legacy of colonialism in many post-colonial contexts is highly local, with colonial experience varying significantly sub-nationally and contributing to cleavages in domestic politics.

What trends have you observed regarding the strategic engagement with gender quotas in Middle Eastern politics, and how do these dynamics influence broader efforts toward gender inclusion in political institutions?

I have several projects related to the obstacles facing female political aspirants in the MENA region.

"Understanding the motivations of all the parties that hold power is critical when working to change the composition of political institutions."

Broadly, this work is motivated by the notably low levels of female political representation in the region, paired with a desire to interrogate and move beyond the stereotyped views of gender politics in the region that prevail in the United States, even within academia. In many cases, people attribute the low female political representation in the region to conservative gender norms. However, my research demonstrates that factors like gatekeeping by party elites play a significant role.

My research on "strategic engagement with gender quotas" unpacks one example of this in Tunisia. We find that party elites strategically placed their legally mandated female-headed electoral lists in the districts in which their party had previously performed the worst, limiting the political trajectories of some female political aspirants. Understanding the motivations of all the parties that hold power is critical when working to change the composition of political institutions.

Several of your studies examine political behavior following states of upheaval, including research on crime waves and support for authoritarian rule in Egypt. Based on your comparative work, how do experiences of state violence or political instability affect citizens' attitudes toward democratic governance versus authoritarian alternatives?

My work, as well as the work of many others, suggests that the impact of violence and disorder depends on who is perpetrating (or perceived as perpetrating) the violence. Violence by the state can lead voters to reject actors linked to the state in subsequent time periods (particularly after a democratic opening), while broader crime waves can lead voters to support state-affiliated actors at higher rates, particularly if those state actors have connections to the security institutions of the state.

In a study of post-2011 Egypt, we see evidence that increased disorder and crime after the 2011 Uprising is associated with greater support for old regime actors. However, in new research I am conducting in Morocco, I find that citizens that face violence at the hands of the state (in this case in the form of harsh drug law enforcement) are more likely to be critical of the legal status quo and more likely to support policy changes limiting the state's coercive power.

Alexandra is an ongoing contributor to multiple GLD projects, and has previously contributed to the _Decentralization Local Governance, and Inequality in the Middle East and North Africa_ edited volume (University of Michigan, 2025), published a working paper, and discussed her work on the _Governance Uncovered_ podcast. For more information about her ongoing work, please visit her website.

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