Letter From the Dean

Gerd Nonneman

In a fast-changing field of study—focusing on a region that is itself undergoing such momentous change in ways that remain to be fully understood—it is especially gratifying to see high-quality, imaginative analytical work emerging among students: work that is both empirically strong and theoretically grounded, and that addresses head-on some of the most complex and interdisciplinary questions pertaining to these emerging dynamics. It is an honor for Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service in Qatar to be able to host this journal, giving a platform to such work. Both as Dean of SFS-Qatar and as a long-term student of Middle Eastern politics, I take special pride and satisfaction from the fact that this journal is itself an initiative of our students. The combination of perspectives from within and from outside the region makes this collection (and the conference that was at the basis of it) all the more valuable.

The social and political trends and dynamics that are being explored in this issue have roots well before the ‘Arab Spring’, and continue to evolve in the post-‘Arab Spring’ era, but in some ways were accentuated by the ferment of this particular period. The upheavals of 2011 and after were arguably an unavoidable reaction to the fundamental twin ills of the ‘ancien régime’ in the region: autocratic ‘security states’ and corrupt, or at least socially and economically ineffective, misallocation of resources: external factors were at most secondary (as also in Iran’s stymied ‘Green Revolution’ and the eventual ejection of Ahmadinejad four years later).

But what was in some ways a tectonic shift did not easily translate into a settled ‘new regime’. By the same token, a host of unresolved tensions were brought out into the open or sharpened, which are unlikely to be smoothly settled soon. That does not, however, mean that the region is in a downward spiral: while some government responses may make things worse (a return to the ‘security state’ surely cannot be a sustainable answer), there is also hope, as evidenced not least in the ability of Tunisians to come together and compromise on a new constitution in January 2014.

Amid all this, the salience and interplay of social media; youth and gender issues; sectarianism; non-state actors; the interplay of domestic, regional and international politics; culture both tangible and intangible; state responses between accommodation and clamp-down; economic challenges and opportunities; and the challenge of balancing development and authenticity while avoiding the pitfalls of rentierism – all have been thrown into sharp relief: these are key issues for policy makers as well as social scientists. The papers in this volume are a thoughtful contribution.