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David A. McMurray, Amanda Ufheil-Somers, eds. *The Arab Revolts: Dispatches on Militant Democracy in the Middle East.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. ix + 260 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-00968-5; $28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-00975-3.

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The Roots of the Arab Spring

When he set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi could not have known that his individual protest would launch a wave of demonstrations that eventually removed a number of long-standing dictators and seriously challenged others. The Arab Spring quickly spread from Tunisia, the site of Bouazizi's protests against official harassment and corruption, to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. In association with the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), the contributors to *The Arab Revolts: Dispatches on Militant Democracy in the Middle East* do an excellent job of filling in some of the gaps in Western media coverage, going beyond the dominant narrative of spontaneous youthful protests, aided by the use of social media, to show a foundation of protest built over decades. The use of the phrase "Arab Revolts" rather than "the Arab Spring" for the title provides an insight into the purpose and scope of the book. Contrary to popular belief, the authors demonstrate that the protests of the Arab Spring were not spontaneous, unprecedented youthful uprisings, but rather were built on decades of protests and strikes against regimes that oversaw an increasing disparity between the prosperous elite and the majority of the population.

The Arab Revolts provides insights and background on five recent revolutions and uprisings: Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain. Each section follows the same general pattern: a brief introduction to the country, its leadership, and the recent protests; an opening article covering the Arab Spring uprising in that country; coverage of earlier decades to provide historical context for the discontent; and a concluding analysis of where things stood at the time of publication. For example, Francesco Cavatorta and Rikke Hostrup Haugbølle's article, "Beyond Ghannouchi: Islamism and Social Change in Tunisia," analyzes the reasons behind the electoral victories of al-Nahda, an Islamist party. Acknowledging the common list of reasons for al-Nahda's success (its organization, especially compared to other parties; its long history; its campaign promises), the authors argue that these often come up short when studied in more depth. Rather, Cavatorta and Haugbølle propose that the reason for the rising identification with religious political parties was the fact that religion was a way to rebel against former president Ben Ali's secularization. Wearing the veil, for instance, served as a form of political protest, not just personal piety. The authors remind readers that it is too early to draw sweeping conclusions about what this election means and that only time will tell how this infusion of new members, with new ideas, will influence parties and organizations like al-Nahda.The essays in *The Arab Revolts* originally appeared in *Middle East Report*, and the international group of authors comes from a variety of institutions, disciplines, and professions (primarily journalism, history, and political science). This diversity gives the book a number of strengths. While each country's section follows the same structure, there are a few unique areas of focus. For example, Donatella Della Ratta's article, "Dramas of the Authoritarian State," examines the creation, production, and distribution of Syrian television dramas that often reflect contemporary events, including protests and demonstrations. It is an interesting examination of the role of media in the Arab protests that goes beyond the traditional discussion of social media and analyzes the way media and state negotiate their relationship. Other authors focus on the efforts of women, as well as how their work is interpreted in the West. Stacey Philbrick Yadav raises an important question concerning the way Western society categorizes Arab women activists, looking at the specific example of Tawakkul Karman's work in Yemen. Karman won the Nobel Peace Prize, and the committee highlighted her ac-

tivities fighting for women's rights. Karman, however, does not specify women as the beneficiaries of her work, but instead says she fights for the rights of all Yemenis. Yet the dominant Western narrative appears to be that if women in the Middle East are politically active, it must follow that they are interested only in women's rights.

Another benefit to the journalistic style of the articles is the accessibility it provides to a wide audience interested in a deeper understanding of the current situation in the Arab world. This is not a book written by academics for academics, but rather serves as an introduction to readers from any background. The articles are generally free from convoluted jargon or theoretical frameworks that could otherwise limit potential readership. The authors tackle complex problems, but present them in a way that is useful for scholars, teachers, students, and general readers. Many articles also challenge the dominant narrative of sectarian conflict and religious extremism among protestors, documenting the secular origins of the revolts (tracing back to decades of demonstrations and actions over economic and security issues) and the communal and intersectarian nature of the protests. Though the United States is only a peripheral actor in the essays, numerous authors demonstrate how U.S. foreign policy, particularly regarding the War on Terror, helped support many of the regimes in question. A number also show how many of those leaders (particularly Yemen's former president 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih) used U.S. fears of terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates, to maintain such support and demonize the opposition. The notable exception is Syrian president Bashar al-Asad. As Carsten Wieland points out, unlike leaders in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, Asad has "no pact with the US or Israel, keeping him close to public opinion on regional issues" (p. 162). This helps explain why Asad continues to maintain stronger support in Syria than any of the other leaders managed in their respective countries, though whether he will be able to maintain that support remains to be seen.

While *The Arab Revolts* does a number of things right, there are a few things that could be improved. One of the book's strengths is the fact that it provides greater context for the current situation in the Middle East and North Africa than is present in Western news coverage. It is missing a very significant event, though: the overthrow of Qaddafi's regime in Libya. The editors briefly explain at the end of the introduction that this omission is due to the limited research academics or journalists could conduct under Qaddafi's rule. As a result, the editors felt that the same kind of "bottom-up views of politics, society, and culture" that made up the other sections were not possible for Libya and thus omitted it (p. 10). Though a reasonable explanation, this reviewer feels there is still a place for a discussion of Libya, especially considering that, as the editors point out, several authors did write articles on the Libyan situation for *Middle East Report*. Libya remains unique because of the NATO intervention, and it would be helpful to get a better understanding of how that intervention has (or has not) influenced the post-revolution situation. This insight would also be important as the world continues to debate its response to the civil war in Syria, but none of the authors references the Libyan situation.

Secondly, it should be noted that since the book's purpose is to give background and context to the Arab Spring, readers should not expect this to be exclusively about the events of 2010-11. The occupation of Tahrir Square, the civil war in Syria, and the suppression of protests in Bahrain are only parts of the story. In addition, though articles may occasionally refer to the influences and impacts of events in other parts of the Arab world (especially the catalyst of Tunisia), they remain independent and thus do not include a great deal of analytical comparison between the various countries and their experiences.

Finally, the variety of authors (and their backgrounds) means that there is a disparity in the academic trappings one might expect. Some articles do not include any citations, while others have very few. The volume contains no bibliography or suggestions for further readings; likewise, because of the journalistic nature of the articles, there is no discussion of the historiography, even in the more history-centric chapters. A concluding essay providing a greater transnational and comparative perspective would have been greatly appreciated as well. None of these issues detract from the quality of this book or its usefulness, but these points further reveal how this book was designed for a broad audience.

The story of the Arab Spring is not over and continually changes. Just in the course of writing this review, protests began in Turkey, "red lines" were crossed in Syria, and the people of Egypt have once again removed the head of state. *The Arab Revolts* obviously cannot predict the outcome of these situations, but it does an admirable job of providing a solid foundation for understanding what has happened and what may come.

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