

# H-Net Reviews

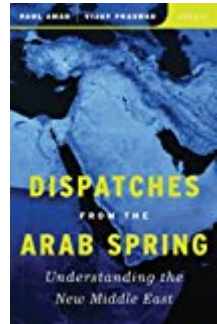
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul Amar, Vijay Prashad, eds. *Dispatches from the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 368 pp. \$69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-8998-9; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-9012-1.

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## Revisiting the Arab Spring

So much has been written about the changing fortunes of the Arab uprisings over the last three years that it is difficult now to recall the sense of giddy transformation and the feelings of hopeful expectation as the protests swept from country to country beginning in January 2011. Stunned by the rapid downfall first of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia on January 14 and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt on February 11, for a few heady weeks it seemed that almost anything might be possible. Escalating demonstrations in Bahrain and Libya threatened briefly to sweep away, respectively, a Persian Gulf ruling dynasty and the region's most mercurial dictator, while the cities and towns of Yemen and Syria were gripped by the peaceful mobilization of vast sectors of the population.

Three years on, Syria lies in ruins, torn apart by a series of conflicts between the Bashar al-Assad regime and various opposition movements, and among competing groups of rebel fighters. The post-Muammar Gaddafi settlement in Libya has fractured the country into local fiefdoms as heavily armed militias defy and confront the central government on a daily basis. Political dialogue meant to smooth Yemen's transition to a pluralistic, post-Ali Abdullah Saleh order has all but broken down and intensifying fighting is again threatening to break apart the fragile reach of the unitary state. In Bahrain, the ruling Al-Khalifa family restored order through a prolonged campaign of repression that destroyed social cohesion and left the country dependent on Saudi Arabia for polit-

ical, economic, and security assistance. Saudi and other Gulf States' support underpins also the restoration of military rule in Egypt following the coup that toppled the elected president, Mohammed Morsi, in July 2013, while in Tunisia the government also resigned in the face of swelling popular anger at its majoritarian rule.

The rapid unfolding of developments across the Middle East and North Africa has put great pressure on traditional publishing outlets to keep up with the pace of events. This presents authors and publishers with two interrelated conundrums. The first is that the time lag between submission and publication renders some (or all) of a book's contents out of date while the second is that there is an inherent difficulty in analyzing a fast "moving target." The wild swings in the fortunes of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood epitomize the challenge of making even preliminary assessments that can stand the test of time. Thus, the final months of 2013 have witnessed the publication of volumes written during 2012 chronicling the advent of a "new" Middle East. To overcome the impediment of publishers' deadlines, the best analyses of the Arab Spring have focused instead on the deeper issues at play, with Charles Tripp's *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (2013) the most outstanding example.

An alternative approach has been followed by the editors of *Dispatches from the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East*. In their introduction, Paul Amar

and Vijay Prashad explain that their collection of country snapshots is intended to lay out “a tentative map for the future, hewed out of a rough comparative agenda for introducing the region to students, the public, and researchers, for tracking new actors, structural economic formations, and political possibilities” (p. xii). The occasional jarring sentence reminds the reader that the individual chapters were written in early 2012, such as the reference to Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud as Crown prince of Saudi Arabia despite his death in June 2012 (p. 91). Yet for the most part, and in spite of the country-specific chapter breakdowns, the fourteen contributions do an admirable job of identifying the transformative factors that gave the Arab Spring uprisings their mold-shattering character. In Amar’s description of Egypt, “the new revolutionary movements succeeded in raising consciousness, creating new political organizations, enabling previously impossible coalitions and solidarities, and mobilizing new passions, visions, and identities” (p. 56). Although events subsequent to 2011 demonstrated the deep resilience of entrenched political interests in resisting and then recapturing the tides of protest, the social dimension of the Arab Spring cannot be wished away by the reassertion of authoritarian or counterrevolutionary control; the struggle for greater political freedoms, transparent government, social justice, and human rights remains evident across the Middle East, albeit in multiple forms and patterns.

Sheila Carapico provides a vivid summation of the concatenation of individuals and organizations that poured into public spaces in Yemen: “Youthful pro-democracy activists, grey-haired socialists, YouTube videos, gun-toting cowboys, Northern carpetbaggers, mutinous army officers, Shia insurgents, kids wearing face paint, tear gas canisters, WikiLeaks cables, performance arts, foreign-born jihadists, dissident tribal sheikhs, and a female Nobel Peace Prize laureate.” This unlikely *mélange* came together “in a gaudy, fast-paced, multi-layered revolutionary theatre” in the spring and summer of 2011 (p. 102). Similarly, Anjali Kamat and Ahmad Shokr’s essay on Libya argues that the anti-Gaddafi uprising “began largely as an unarmed, leaderless movement,” whereas Adam Hanieh recounts how the popular movement that emerged in Bahrain in early 2011 “was the latest manifestation of a decades-long struggle for political and socioeconomic rights in the country” (pp. 166, 64). Both Libya and Bahrain witnessed external intervention in the form, respectively, of North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led forces on the side of the Libyan rebels and Saudi-led forces on the side of the

Bahraini government. The twin interventions, which began within the space of five days in March 2011, illustrate the complexity of national and regional responses to the Arab Spring, as two countries in particular—Qatar and the United Arab Emirates—simultaneously backed rebels in the one instance and facilitated a regime crackdown in the other. Underlining how the diverging trajectories of mobilization and regime response influenced the subsequent course of events in different states, Paulo Pinto’s account of the early stages of the Syrian uprising makes the point that the protests were “much more localized and fragmented than the uprisings of national scale that marked the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions” (p. 205). The focus on the role of class, regionalism, and the urban/rural divide in influencing the contours of the early stages of the Syrian uprising adds great value to the analytical dissection of the dynamics of repression and social fragmentation that have, three years on, torn the country apart.

Even in the formative period of the uprisings covered in the book, it was becoming evident that the progression of the Arab Spring was not going to be smooth, linear, or even subject to reversal. Chapters on Algeria and Iraq examine the political dynamics that hindered the spread of protests in two of the most militarized states in the region, while the contributions on Morocco and Jordan explore the range of policy safety valves that provided the embattled monarchies with a degree of breathing space that may yet prove short-lived; Jillian Schwedler’s description of “the political geography of protests” in Amman is especially thought provoking as she describes how “the tactics for policing and repressing protests were in large part a function of space, visibility, and the potential for disruption” (pp. 253, 256). Lebanon’s perennial instability perversely saved the country from sustained Arab Spring unrest as “would-be Lebanese revolutionaries of 2011 could not build a mass movement” that could transcend “institutional, historical, and social difference” (p. 279).

Only one chapter deals full-on with the counterrevolutionary momentum that would, eventually, check the “tide of history” and deal it a profound, if perhaps only temporary, reverse. In his essay on Saudi Arabia, Toby Jones writes that “while the kingdom’s coercive power was considerable, its potential for violence was matched by its ability to use its tremendous wealth to buy off would-be dissenters” (p. 93). In addition to sectarianizing the uprising in Bahrain and portraying the sustained unrest among Saudi Shia communities in the Eastern Province through the same sectarian lens, Saudi lead-

ers led other Gulf States in massive government handouts and welfare packages that succeeded in blunting the calls for change albeit at the not-insignificant cost of undermining the search for sustainable economic development intended to cushion the inevitable transition to post-redistributive political economies in the region.

Given the subsequent importance first of Qatar, and later of the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent, Kuwait, in projecting influence across the region but particularly in Egypt and Syria, the volume lacks a significant Gulf component to it. This is perhaps unsurprising for only in Bahrain did prolonged demonstrations occur, but the Gulf States have emerged—for good or for worse—as the most important regional actors possessing both the intent and the capability to intervene in support of various political currents. The omission of these states is the only major fault with this volume, which otherwise succeeds in matching analysis of unfolding events with reflection on their deeper significance for a region that

indisputably remains very much in flux.

By disaggregating the Arab Spring into its constituent parts, the potent legacies of sociopolitical formation, past (and frozen) conflicts, and differing degrees of authoritarianism all become readily apparent. Events have certainly moved on since the chapters in this book were written in 2012, and the region is in a very different—and rather more uncertain—place. We cannot be sure how the struggle that began in 2011 will unfold or where it will end, but it is clearer now than ever before that the genie cannot be put back into the bottle and the region's rulers cannot simply turn the clock back to December 2010, however much they try. The subtitle of *Dispatches from the Arab Spring* is “Understanding the New Middle East,” and the book offers an excellent starting point for further exploration of the tangled trajectories of change that will, ultimately, define the political and economic re-ordering of the region.

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