

**Elizabeth F. Thompson.** *Justice Interrupted: The Struggle for Constitutional Government in the Middle East.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. Illustrations, maps. xi + 418 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-07313-5.



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In the nearly three years since the Arab uprisings began, the expertise of Middle East historians has been in demand like almost never before, as observers attempt to understand the historical roots underlying the seemingly sudden popular challenges to long-standing authoritarian regimes. The result has been a surge in publications that are broad in their scope and appeal but limited in the depth of their analysis and historical insight. A strong exception to this trend is the recent work of historian Elizabeth F. Thompson, whose study on the rise of constitutionalism in the Middle East swiftly dispenses with the facile explanations of the Arab uprisings, instead offering readers a comprehensive yet nuanced look at the lasting impact of efforts to enshrine and institutionalize the language of justice across the region during the last two centuries. While the study is bookended by a discussion of the implications that these developments hold for the contemporary calls for universal rights, its substantive chapters provide a perceptive and deeply contextualized look at the common thread under-

lying a struggle that dates back to the premodern era.

The strength of Thompson's approach is in her ability to take what could otherwise be seen as a fluid and abstract notion--justice--and explore it through the lives of figures who devoted their lives to seeing it enshrined in the emerging institutions of the modern state. Far from a "Great Man" reading of history, however, the focus on individual actors is a device used to demonstrate the ubiquity of the concept of justice across broad segments of society in Egypt, Iran, the latter day Ottoman Empire, and the states it yielded. The resulting narrative presents a common struggle to combat the forces of exploitation, inequality, and imperialism as they presented the greatest impediment to a modern world that maintained the legacy of justice on which successive Islamic dynasties were built.

The Ottoman Circle of Justice provides a convenient starting point for Thompson's analysis. At a time when the functions of the state were ex-

panding far beyond what they had been under earlier dynastic rulers, the Ottoman Empire relied on a more complex formula to establish its legitimacy. While the establishment of justice was a cornerstone of prior Islamic empires, Ottoman officials surpassed the Islamic legal tradition of the Shari'a and attempted to utilize multiple sources of legal authority, from traditional Turkish decrees to the codified system of laws established by Suleiman I, as the basis for their interpretation of justice. By the nineteenth century, foreign influences would also leave their mark, as Ottoman reformers like Mustafa Reshid Pasha attempted to incorporate universal values in a civilizational project that promised to appeal to religious minorities within the Ottoman Empire and their supporters in Western Europe.

In fact, the thrust of the book's argument challenges the false binary between liberalism and Islam, on which many of the internal and regional political conflicts in the twentieth-century Middle East have been built. Thompson posits that, regardless of where they fall on that supposedly dividing line, reformers and activists in the Middle East promoted a universal set of values meant to achieve the common goal of a just society within a political system that represented the interests and protected the rights of its citizens. That this mission often ended in frustration and failure is by no means reflective of the efforts put forward by these figures or the movements they founded. Rather, hegemonic forces, whether from within the emerging modern state, such as the absolutist monarchy or the military, or externally in the form of European imperialism, presented the most immediate impediments to constructive change.

The mid-nineteenth-century Ottoman reforms known as the Tanzimat present a compelling early case study, precisely because of the tendency to associate them with both the sultan and his European benefactors. Originating within a newly established cosmopolitan class of Ottoman bureau-

crats, these reformers "did not blindly adopt European ideas; rather, they embraced liberal concepts precisely because they resonated with their own values" (p. 34). Elsewhere, however, Thompson alludes to "European interference" that pressured the sultan to issue a decree guaranteeing full equality among his subjects, which "violated principles of sacred Islamic law" (p. 54). Clearly, the tension between what was an authentic representation of the will of Ottoman subjects (or by now, citizens) and what was a forcible adoption of European norms is not one that can be resolved in this work. But if it had not been so before, by the end of the nineteenth century, it became painfully apparent that the region's rulers and the increasingly repressive European colonial powers had cast their lot against the establishment of just norms, which by this point had come to be expressed in calls for constitutionalism.

The failures of constitutional movements in the Ottoman Empire (1876), Egypt (1882), and Iran (1906) planted the seeds of division and doubt among local populations that an appeal to a universal set of values could redress the injustices they faced. The experiences of figures like Ahmed Urabi in Egypt and Nazem al-Islam Kermani in Iran were the last vestiges of attempts to pursue a project that appeared both authentically Islamic and liberal. Both led popular movements toward a more just, representative form of government rooted in a constitution that protected against exactly the types of abuses that became a fixture of Middle Eastern states throughout the early twentieth century.

In fact, in Thompson's analysis, World War I emerges as a critical breaking point between the universalist aims of constitutionalism and the deep faith in it demonstrated by Middle Eastern polities on the one hand, and the mass disillusionment and divisive politics that resulted from the postwar settlement on the other. The lives of a wide range of figures, from Halide Edib and Musa Kazim to Hasan al-Banna, Yusuf Salman Yusuf

(Comrade Fahd), and Akram al-Hourani, offer a sobering view into emerging models of justice as channeled through narrower ideological outlooks. The universal character of earlier movements had given way to the rise of activist missions expressed through nationalism, Islamism, socialism, and communism. Even as the case is made for “the endurance of constitutionalism as an ultimate ideal,” the fault lines dividing these approaches to the fulfillment of broad national goals is what characterizes the eras of colonialism and independence (p. 116). Moreover, as movements from the Muslim Brotherhood to the Baath Party demonstrated on multiple occasions their willingness to pursue their objectives through explicitly illiberal means, by the 1960s the pendulum appears to have swung decidedly away from the liberalism that prevailed during earlier eras.

Within this trajectory, the curious choice of David Ben-Gurion as another figure profiled in this analysis becomes more comprehensible. He shared more in common with the European colonialists responsible for frustrating the aspirations of the indigenous populations of the Middle East and had no connection to the century-long tradition of constitutionalism that defined the struggles for justice in the region by the time of his arrival in Palestine. However, through Ben-Gurion, the Zionist movement appropriated the language of rights (albeit with its trademark exclusivism) that developed in the struggles for independence from European powers by Arab nationalists.

The success of Zionism in the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine also left its mark on subsequent struggles, as witnessed in the ways that anti-Zionism became a cornerstone not only of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Baath Party, but also in the Palestinian movement itself. The story of Abu Iyad, a leader in the Palestine Liberation Organization, demonstrates the extent to which political realities shaped the development of new notions of justice and the means by which they were pursued. In this case, dispossession, oc-

cupation, and the complete absence of legitimate channels through which to engage in political contestation led directly to the rise of revolutionary ideals and militant resistance.

Similar conditions in other states spurred the rise of a revolutionary strain of Islamism by intellectuals like Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati, who witnessed the worst excesses of secular authoritarianism. Like for the Palestinian case, Thompson paints a portrait of a justice movement that veered off the path of inclusion and universal ideals out of a response to equally harsh and intolerant conditions. When given the opportunity, however, Islamists have always favored a nonviolent path to achieving the broader goals of a just society. Therefore, in the long march toward enshrining these principles, the Islamic insurgencies in Egypt, Iran, and elsewhere emerge as aberrations from the normal course of affairs, especially when one considers how al-Qaeda’s model of resistance gave way to the peaceful mass mobilization favored by millions of people during the Arab uprisings that erupted in late 2010.

If, as Thompson’s interwoven analysis contends, the ideological movements that arose after World War I never truly departed from the spirit of liberal constitutionalism, the nature of the Arab uprisings provide a case in point. The grassroots, leaderless origins; the cosmopolitan, inclusive, nonideological character; and the broad appeal to universal values that typified these movements signaled only to the keenest observer that these movements were hardly new. While modern constitutions had only resulted in repressive forms of governance, faith in the ability of constitutionalism to establish justice may have faltered but it never shattered entirely.

Egyptian Wael Ghonim and other youth activists across the Middle East demonstrated strong belief in the power of mass mobilization, but only insofar as it could serve as a vehicle to deliver just constitutional reforms. The fluidity and dynamism of the revolts ensured their wide appeal

and signaled a marked ability to overcome the stigma associated with the promotion of liberal values. Thompson concludes on an uplifting note, arguing that, by channeling their grievances through “indigenous traditions of justice” the populations of the Middle East “permitted the return to universal models of rights and representation.” One is left to wonder, however, whether the recent setbacks across a number of countries that were home to popular uprisings will generate a relapse of a rejuvenated authoritarianism, and with it, a renewed disillusionment with these universal models and those who promote them. As Thompson concedes that “if the Arab Spring is to bear fruit, it will be because foreign powers abandon the kinds of interventions practiced in the colonial and Cold War eras” (p. 335), one would do well to recall the words of William Gladstone, a liberal nineteenth-century British prime minister, who said that “justice delayed is justice denied.”

William Gladstone

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