

Mahmood Monshipouri. *Democratic Uprisings in the New Middle East: Youth, Technology, Human Rights, and US Foreign Policy.* Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014. xi + 221 pp. \$31.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-61205-135-2.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The narrative of the Arab Spring continues to unfold even as scholars like Mahmood Monshipouri attempt to make sense of the ongoing unrest. In *Democratic Uprisings*, Monshipouri examines the Arab Spring by exploring the shifting identities of Arab youth connected to technology and democratic uprisings, and then concludes with a chapter that tries to evaluate the history of US foreign policy in the Middle East, along with implications for US policy in view of the Arab Spring.

Monshipouri has done an impressive amount of research, making use of a wide array of academic books, journal articles, newspapers, and various online sources. Given the close proximity of time between the events discussed and the writing of the book, these secondary sources work as primary sources, too. That being said, since the book purports to analyze youth, technology, and democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), it would have been nice to see more sources from the region.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the strongest chapter of the book, “Emerging Identities: Emotions, Protests, and New Media,” includes more source material from the region, primarily Egypt. Monshipouri is at his best when exploring the intersection of culture and identity. He uses the story of Shirin Ebadi, winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize, to highlight the changing role of women in Iranian society, explaining that “Iran’s hard-line conservatives felt threatened and undermined by this global notoriety” (p. 79). Although Ebadi’s efforts have not led to widespread change, Monshipouri notes that greater female involvement in Iranian politics may be on the horizon as Iranian females comprise 64 percent of university graduates (p. 79). Moreover, the uncertainty created by the Arab Spring has allowed for feminist advances in Egypt, which bears some similarities to the situation described in Vijay Prashad’s chapter on Egyptian feminism during the early years of Gamal Nasser’s rule in his impressive book, *The Darker Nations*.^[1] The section entitled “Arab Hip-Hop Culture” also deserves mention. Khaled M.

Libyan, son of a Qaddafi dissident, reminds his listeners that no secular ruler in the region can supersede the power of God in his song, "Can't Take Our Freedom" (p. 93). Some discussion is also given to a young Tunisian rapper, El General; the "godfather of Yemeni hip-hop," Hagage "AJ" Masaed; and Palestinian hip-hop rappers like Tamer Nafar. For Monshipouri, "hip-hop culture in the Muslim world, represented by rap music and popularized by graffiti on walls, has come to mobilize the youth's defiance against their governments and create a sense of solidarity--both inside their country and across the border--with those defying the status quo" (p. 92).

Monshipouri observes that a "heightened sense of pan-Arabism" is "evidenced by a significant degree of imagined community among Arabs everywhere" (p. 2). Indeed, the theme of "imagined communities" seems quite relevant for this book. But unfortunately Monshipouri does not engage Benedict Anderson, and to account for the idea of imagined communities instead he references only a recent article in *Current History*. Nationalism has been one of the most disruptive Western forces to invade the Middle East and North Africa, resulting in artificial borders and undermining traditional forms of identity (family, religion, community, for examples). What role does national identity play in a potentially burgeoning pan-Arabism movement made possible by the digital age? This seems like an important question to address, especially given previous movements like Nasserism and the United Arab Republic and how nationalist concerns, in part, undermined these efforts to establish solidarity across borders.

There seems to be a significant structural problem with the book. The first (roughly) two-thirds of the book discusses several intriguing elements of the Arab Spring, like the importance of digital technology, unemployment, and youth participation in revolutionary movements. But the final (roughly) third of the book tries to bring US

foreign policy into the discussion. In all likelihood, few academics would argue with the notion that US policy in the Middle East needs to better reflect the importance of relations with Arab states. But with the background established by the author, the section that considers US foreign policy in light of the Arab Spring distracts from an otherwise thoughtful investigation of culture and identity. I think the author would have been better off writing about one or the other, and then devoting the whole of the book to exploring that theme.

The author astutely recognizes that a "counter-Jihadist identity" has developed thanks to a "merger of youth identity and social media identity," and importantly, Arab youth have "attributed the enlargement of democracy and civil society to nonviolent democratic change and civil disobedience" (p. 98). The long-term implications of this growing sense of nonviolent togetherness remains to be seen, but the importance of this development should not be ignored. Thus, Monshipouri has offered a valuable contribution to our understanding of the Arab Spring. Yet the book suffers from an overall lack of coherence, which could have been avoided by choosing to further explore some very interesting ideas about shifting identity and cultural expression while leaving a discussion of US foreign policy for a separate work.

Note

[1]. Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 51-61.

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