

Review: The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprisings

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Abstract

Mark L. Haas and David W. Lesch (eds.), *The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprisings*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017). Pp. 338. \$27.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8133-4974-9.

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Keywords

Arab Spring, Uprisings, Dissent, Protests

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Since the events widely known as the Arab Spring started in 2011, scholars and researchers have produced more than 200 books and ten times as many journal articles. For an event that is, by some measures, still ongoing, this body of knowledge is astounding. This broad interest speaks to several key facts. First, the region impacted by the Arab Spring is important geopolitically to the rest of the world. Second, advances in publishing technology and changes in publishing industry practices have made it possible for academic works to be put in the public domain in a fraction of the time it used to take a work of scholarship to reach its audience. Third, the revolution in communication technology has enabled researchers to access primary sources, collect evidence, and interpret data more efficiently. These changes come with opportunities and challenges. One challenge is the researcher's ability to gather all the facts necessary to make sound conclusions. The editors of *The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprisings*, Mark Haas and David Lesch, quickly became keenly aware of this challenge, declaring that "writing or commenting on current or recent events in the Middle East is a hazardous business" (xi). This is one reason the volume needed a second edition in less than two years.

The volume is well organized, and there is no question that the expertise of the contributors makes this work an indispensable resource for professors, students, and informed members of the public. The editors provide information about the substance of each chapter and the reason behind the selection of the expert and the topic. Despite the time pressure, the contributors produced detailed accounts of what has happened and why it happened in the country they were studying. The perspectives were diverse as were the approaches and methods. There is no benefit in summarizing the skills and insights of each contributor, for doing so for an edited volume will always fall short in giving each one their due credit. Instead, I focus on the very few shortcomings of the volume, especially the ones that apply to all chapters.

One memorable statement was the editors' claim that the "so-called Arab Spring unexpectedly erupted in late 2010 and early 2011" (1). The same impression was present explicitly or implicitly in the other chapters. I have also heard it at professional conferences and other forums. The Arab Spring was a surprise to everyone. I am not sure that everyone was surprised by what happened, perhaps by *when* it happened and *how* it happened but not

by the fact it happened. The idea of an “Arab Spring”—that it is a peaceful uprising that resulted in the overthrow of a regime, which is the sense intended in many quarters—is not common in Islamic societies, is Eurocentric, and is factually baseless.

First, most successful uprisings or revolutions have been more or less unexpected. After all, since such uprisings are a threat primarily to governing regimes, if they happen as expected, the government would not be doing its job of protecting itself from the masses. So, there is nothing special about an uprising unexpectedly happening in the Middle East. Moreover, it might help to point out that Tunisia, the country some believe to be the birthplace of the Arab Spring, is no stranger to Arab Springs. It suffices to note that Ben Ali, who was overthrown by the 2011 uprising, himself came to power through another Arab Spring that took place in 1987 that overthrew Habib Bourguiba, although Ben Ali may want to take credit for a bloodless coup instead of giving credit to the uprising of 1987. Furthermore, from the 1970s until 1987, Tunisians often rose up, peacefully, to protest corruption, to complain about economic conditions, and/or to demand political reform. Similar uprisings took place in Algeria in the 1980s, and we cannot ignore the popular uprising in Iran in 1978–79 that resulted in the overthrow of the Shah. It should also be noted that in Egypt and in other Arab countries, protests, albeit low key and less dramatic when compared to Tunisia’s, took place, and people dissented and risked jail and torture before the Tunisian uprising of 2010–11. The implication that the 2011 uprisings, are a special event, and Arab Spring, diminishes the sacrifices the people of the region and deprive them of agency; representing them as peoples who lacked initiative, more likely to react than to act.

The last critique is that all contributors to this volume either ignored or downplayed the role of regional and global actors in shaping the trajectory of the subsequent uprisings. NATO and Qatar played a decisive role in the war in Libya. Regional and global actors’ direct military interventions in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen predestined the near future of these countries. And, most recently, and related to the first critique, the world’s reaction—or, more appropriately, inaction—to the gruesome killing of Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi at the hands of Saudi operatives believed to have been acting on orders from the Saudi crown prince underscores the role of Western countries in steering events in the region.

Another common theme was present throughout the volume: a linear logic that endows an uprising with a cause, a plan of action, and an end goal, such as the “creation of stable democratic regimes in their place” (6). That, too, is a misrepresentation of popular uprisings, especially the 2011 uprisings in Arab countries. Uprisings happen not because someone like Mohamed Bouazizi manages to do something out of the ordinary to ignite them. Uprisings often happen when the conditions that are being protested reach a threshold. That was the case in Tunisia, and one could argue that if it were not Bouazizi shocking act, it would have been something else. Uprisings and revolutions are not about replacing a regime or an ideology with another. Uprisings and revolutions are about interruptions. Those who rise up are often interested in putting an end to a trend, but they are rarely interested in creating a substitute. In Tunisia, for instance, most of the protesters, like Bouazizi, had no *unifying* political or ideological interest or motives. However, once the regime fell, ideological and political groups like Ennahda and others from the left and right moved in to fill the vacuum.

These critiques are not intended to diminish the value and importance of this volume dealing with one of the most consequential events of the century thus far. Rather, they are intended to provide another point of reference for a discussion that the authors will soon have as they contemplate another edition of this important work.