

Middle East Historians and the Arab Spring: Early-Days Assessment

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After the shock, comes the flurry; after the amazement, bewilderment, gasping for understanding, come the soul searching, the recriminations, the blame. The Arab Spring, it has become clear, brought in its wings a major storm to the community of Middle East and North African scholars and analysts. Some would say it is typical academic *hubris*, others would make fun of social science and its predictive presumption. But somehow, most of us expected that we, unlike everyone else, would not be taken by such a huge surprise. Many of us are historians by training; we study the past, explain what already happened, try the best we can to understand events and processes. We are taught how to deal with the sources, evaluate them, assess and assign credibility to them, cross them against each other, and then use them to explain behavior, individual and collective, in a given time and place. Unlike our colleagues in theory-driven social science, we do not predict future outcomes, we do not assess risks and promises, and we are not supposed to believe that the past we think we understand is bound, or even likely, to repeat itself when seemingly similar circumstances occur.

Yet, because we know the languages of the Middle East and North Africa, and have studied the history of their peoples, their cultures, and their political-social-economic structures, “the public” looks to us for commentary and analysis in times of crisis. We are thus put in the perpetual dilemma of area specialists in general: to resist the temptation to predict the course of events and be seen as aloof, esoteric, irrelevant to the needs of the people who fund our scholarly endeavors through grants, tuition, higher education state budgets; or, to succumb to pressures from decision-makers, the media, and various think-tanks, to provide our learned opinions or educated guesses and risk being wrong, misleading, or out of touch with realities. For the many of us who chose the latter option, the riveting events of the Arab Spring have brought a time of reckoning. This did take some time to emerge in full force, but as the following passages show, arrive it has, appropriately, with the summer heat wave in the eastern Mediterranean.

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One of the early and serious reflections on these questions is Gregory Gause's recent article in *Foreign Affairs*.² This article is a strong and sincere *mea culpa*, which criticizes Middle East experts for "underestimating the hidden forces driving change" while they worked instead to explain the unshakable stability of repressive authoritarian regimes. "As they wipe the egg off their faces," he writes, "they need to reconsider long-held assumptions about the Arab world." Candidly, Gause concludes that "academic specialists on Arab politics, such as myself, have quite a bit of rethinking to do." His diagnosis is that analysts have missed the undercurrents of change that were simmering in the Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa because they were committed to the view that the autocratic regimes in the region were well entrenched, and hence immune to change from below in a revolutionary situation.

Therefore, Gause now advocates that we search for the current forces that will shape the new Middle East in the short and perhaps longer terms. The purpose for doing this, in his words, is to "allow U.S. policymakers to approach the Arab revolts more effectively by providing them insight into the factors that will drive postrevolutionary politics in the Arab world." However, herein lie the seeds of the next expert oversight, and the almost inevitable future *mea culpa*. For, hard as it may be to admit, we are not now better positioned to identify those hidden forces and submerged structures than we had been before the Arab Spring. In fact, we might now commit the opposite mistake by overlooking the forces of conservative authoritarianism and their determination to reassert themselves in a different, seemingly more democratic guise. After all, such forces did manage to survive over long decades and repress reluctant if complacent populations. The old power elites learned the power of cooptation and mastered the use of both the carrot and the stick. They are not gone, not even fully dispersed, and their ability to regroup and morph into "new elites" should not be cheerfully dismissed.

Indeed, one of the new features of emerging Middle Eastern realities, according to Gause, is highly debatable. He asserts that "most Middle East scholars believed that pan-Arabism had gone dormant," and that "they thus missed the communal wave of 2011." He then adds that "if any doubts remain that Arabs retain a sense of common political identity despite living in 20 different states, the events of this year should put them to rest." Gause admits that what he calls a new wave of pan-Arabism is quite different from its predecessors, notably the brand marketed by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1960s. However, he is convinced – prematurely I would

² F. Gregory Gause III, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (July/August 2011), pp. 81-90.

argue – that the Arab Spring crossed state boundaries and united the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East and North Africa. “As a result,” Gause concludes, “scholars and policymakers can no longer approach countries on a case-by-case basis.”

If instincts serve, I would make a prediction almost to the contrary, i.e., that among the forces most likely to reassert themselves in the region are the interests and *raison d'état* considerations of particular Arab states. This is in no way to deny the fact that the common marketplace of ideas and information has been reinvigorated in the region, and that present-day technologies and social network media have a strong presence that will endure in coming years. However, active cultural exchange has not yet produced common political action or shown any evidence of being a force to contend with. In fact, the most insightful and helpful explanations of the Arab Spring have thus far been precisely those offered on a country-by-country basis. These have demonstrated that we cannot actually understand what is going on in Libya by learning from what has transpired in Yemen, Bahrain, or Syria, let alone by events in Egypt and Tunisia. Accordingly, U.S. policies – whether right or wrong – had (and will have) to be devised on a case-by-case basis, and a common policy towards all would have been (and is likely to be) disastrous.

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The latest issue of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*³ devotes an entire section to “Reflections: Middle East Studies at the Barricades,” including an introductory comment by editors Beth Baron and Sara Pursley. Here, the views and feelings are more mixed than in Gause’s article. Baron and Pursley preempt the mostly self-critical section by pointing out “the few ways in which past scholarship on the Middle East *has* produced insights for understanding the unfolding events” (italics in the original, ERT). The predictive undercurrents that were identified by scholars, argue the editors, are the possible implications of the dynamic “youth bulge,” the linkage between the emerging new media and a process of democratization, and the “future prospects” of old autocratic, neoliberal regimes vis-à-vis their pro-democracy opposition. However, and regardless of the editors’ lack of enthusiasm to engage in the debate about the arguable failure of Middle East scholars to predict the Arab Spring, it is precisely the latter point that drives the entire discussion: we inevitably fall short if we *underestimate* the outcome

³ Vol. 43, No. 3 (August 2011), pp. 379-390 (with a related “Roundtable: Rethinking the Study of Middle East Militaries,” pp. 391-407).

of any socio-political process (here, the success of the uprisings) even if we *correctly identify* the process itself. This is the inescapable crux of the matter.

Most of the ten contributors to the “Reflections” section, however, seem to share the sense of a missed opportunity to show the world that understanding the Middle East and North Africa entails also a capacity for predicting the main political directions in the region. Some of them celebrate the collapse of prevailing notions about the stagnation of Arab culture, Islamic fanaticism, and the unchangeable nature of Middle East polities.⁴ Middle East and North African exceptionalism and particularism are happily pronounced dead,⁵ and a premature downgrading of Islamist politics and its future impact are in evidence, in one form or another. “A striking feature of these movements,” opines Laurence Louer, “is that they depart from Islamist identity politics” and no longer attribute all the woes of the Arabs to their betrayal of their Muslim religious identity.⁶ In the early days of the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, one of the young men proudly told a Western reporter on camera: “Look, this is an *Allahu Akbar*-free revolution!” But already at this point in the game, it seems that his hopes and Louer’s observation might be premature.

In any event, the sentiments that prevail in all the reflective pieces in *IJMES* are of great admiration and enthusiasm for the Arab Spring uprisings and a strong identification with their declared goals to bring down the tyrants and install democracy in the region. It is hard—and unnecessary—to deny the appeal of these movements or to temper the well-deserved respect that they arouse in most of us, keen students of the region’s societies, cultures, and politics. This sentiment reminds me of a candid statement intimated to me by a senior and highly respected scholar in the field way back in the 1980s. A supporter of various Arab causes who occasionally engaged in mild activism on regional issues, he confessed that, as a committed member of the Left, he found it easy, even natural, to identify with Arab regimes who professed socialism in one form or another. However, as Islamic politics and movements gained power or increased in stature, and with the language of politics in general becoming more religious, identification became to him more difficult, less natural. Somehow, I think, Middle East scholars are now jubilant also because the new movements—appearing secular and democratic—hold the hope that identification with regional causes could become natural yet again.

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⁴ Asef Bayat, *ibid.*, p. 386.

⁵ Bayat, Nathan Brown, and Malika Zeghal, *ibid.*, pp. 386, 388, and 390, respectively.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

In the annual lecture delivered at the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies in March 1993, Fred Halliday discussed Edward Said's *Orientalism* and its critics.⁷ Describing his own background and the influences it had on his career, Halliday stressed the experience of being a student in the 1960s at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London, with momentous, formative events taking place before and during that period in the Middle East and the world at large: "The Middle East was, in this context, part of a broader pattern of third world revolt—not just Algeria after 1954, Iraq in 1958, or Yemen in 1962, or Algeria, or Palestine after 1967, but also Cuba, South Africa, Vietnam." He was thus impressed by the role of imperialism and "the forms of resistance that developed to this, on national and social bases, and the way in which economic and social factors, not least class, affected these societies." Halliday goes on to say that

[I]n a sense, it is that agenda of the 1960s, now nearing thirty [and at present fifty, ERT] years in duration, which has preoccupied me in the analysis of the region: the questions I would ask are how forms of domination are maintained; how and why they are resisted; why states fail to maintain control; how those who come to power succeed, or fail, in constructing alternative domestic and international orders.

In fact, one could easily write the same lines today, half a century after the upheavals that changed the Middle East and North Africa and set their countries on a path that is now undergoing yet another major transformation. Halliday asked in 1993 almost precisely the same questions that we are asking today, and puzzled over the same issues that amaze us at present. His search for explanations sent him then to the deeper structures that underlie the processes, that are hidden from the naked eye, that then, as now, seem to elude the most knowledgeable and discerning observers. Gause and the contributors to the "Reflections" and "Roundtable" sections of *IJMES* are searching for the same undercurrents, groping for the same intractables. So, the question is where do we go from here? Are we, Middle East scholars of all disciplines, doomed to be relegated to the same position in a decade or two, or three, yet again?

For me, watching closely the riveting events of the Arab Spring has been, first and foremost, a humbling experience. As historians, I strongly believe that we need not concern ourselves with forecasts of the future; rather, we are and must remain committed to understanding and explaining the past. Even

⁷ *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1993), 145-163. The quoted passages are from pp. 146 and 147.

Gregory Gause concedes that “[i]t is impossible for social scientists to make precise predictions about the Arab world, and this should not be a goal.” This is of course true for experts working on the non-Arabic speaking world, but if we were to accept this unreservedly, it would mean denying a very strong intuition that exists among scholars, namely, that our intimate familiarity with the culture and socio-political realities of the past and, to a lesser extent, the present, leads us – and “the public” – to believe that we might know more about the future than other people, those who do not possess that kind of knowledge.

It is this lack of intellectual and scholarly modesty that lures us, time and again, into the same trap. Only a few weeks ago, Nobel Laureate in Economics Joseph Stiglitz wondered publicly why all the top macro-economists in the world failed to predict – and perhaps prevent – the global financial crisis of 2008.⁸ These masters of economic science gathered for one of the Lindau Conferences only a month before the collapse of international markets and did not even mention such a possibility, he added in wonder. Sovietologists were similarly clueless before the downfall of the Soviet Union. And so, we must admit, the Arab Spring is our Berlin Wall, or Wall Street. Instead of looking for the hidden structures and movements that we missed, I therefore propose a somewhat more modest, philosophical approach. If we zoom out and look at the big picture, perhaps we will be able to understand what is knowable and acknowledge what will remain inaccessible to us regardless of how well we come to know our subject matter.

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Does this mean we need to abandon all hope for models and theories that can provide insights into socio-political processes, even if these ultimately fail to predict the outcome of such processes? Most certainly not. An immediate example that comes to mind is Theda Skocpol’s theory of social revolution (as distinct from political revolution), which was used by Juan Cole in his treatment of the Egyptian Urabi revolution in 1882, an event that other scholars, most notably Alexander Schölch, see as a “mere” revolt.⁹ For

⁸ Joseph Stiglitz on the Deficiencies of Macroeconomics (lecture video), posted to the website of *Social Europe Journal*, 28 August 2011. Stiglitz wrote in the abstract of the lecture he delivered at the 2011 Nobel Laureate Meetings at Lindau: “The standard macroeconomic models have failed, by all the most important tests of scientific theory. They did not predict that the financial crisis would happen; and when it did, they understated its effects” (“Imagining an Economics that Works: Crisis, Contagion and the Need for a New Paradigm,” The Nobel Laureate Meetings at Lindau, 2011 - 4th Meeting in Economic Sciences: <http://www.lindau-nobel.org/AbstractDetails.AxCMS?AbstractID=1277>).

⁹ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Juan R.I. Cole,

example, Skocpol's concept of *conjunctures*—"the coming together of separately determined and not consciously coordinated (or deliberately revolutionary) processes and group efforts"¹⁰—helps us understand what we are witnessing in the Arab Spring. Such conjunctures occur when an unanticipated political impact in one social sector is being transferred to another social sector. However, this is not enough for a revolution to occur, she argues, as all three components that create social revolutionary situations must be present: the autocracy of the old regimes, contradictions within the class system, and a set of political conjunctures that can trigger a revolutionary process.

All these would be easily recognized by observers of the Arab Spring: autocratic regimes that ruled for decades using a wide array of repressive measures; growing social inequality as a result of the concentration of capital in the hands of ruler-backed military and civilian elites; and then, the ability to use social networks as a platform to channel political protest from one sector to another, rapidly and effectively. Skocpol also envisages the conflict that could emerge within elites, that is, between reformists and conservatives, both facing revolutionary action from non-elite groups that forces them to take sides. Skocpol's approach is also flexible enough to allow for development over longer periods of time (though conjunctures are short in duration), and it bypasses structural requirements of effective organization and leadership, which for the most part did not exist in the Arab Spring. But even Skocpol's historians-friendly theory is driven by the past and is *post facto* by nature, as it cannot predict *if* conjunctures will occur nor *when* they are *likely* to occur. So, once again, we are forced to accept the limitations of our abilities.

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Thus, the title given to a recent *New York Times* piece by Anthony Shadid—"After Arab Revolts, Reigns of Uncertainty"¹¹—also suits quite well the current predicament of Middle East scholars. As much as we would like to come up with quick explanations about what happened, is still happening, we need to do what is most difficult—to reserve judgment, to sit back and simply admit that we really do not know how things are going to develop. Shadid's opening paragraph, which is as sensitive and insightful as it is modest and unpretentious, also deserves our attention. Writing from Djerba, Tunisia, he says (the italics are mine for emphasis, ERT):

Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's 'Urabi Movement (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 3-6.

¹⁰ Skocpol, p. 288.

¹¹ 24 August 2011.

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The *idealism* of the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia, where the *power of the street* revealed the *frailty of authority*, revived an Arab world *anticipating change*. But Libya's *unfinished revolution*, as *inspiring* as it is *unsettling*, illustrates how *perilous* that change has become as it unfolds in this phase of the Arab Spring.

This encapsulates so much of what we hope and fear at the same time: the idealism and revival with which it has been so easy to identify; the unexpected power of the street and the surprising frailty of the dictators; the inspiration and anticipation of change; but no less the strong sense of peril and the unsettling effect such upheavals can have upon both those who experience them and those who watch from afar on television and computer screens. Major socio-political transformations entail both hope and fear; you cannot have one without the other; and yes, one must let the dust settle, the tremors and after-shocks recede. Political scientists need answers, explanations, and models right now, while the earth is still moving under our feet, but historians can and must wait for the calm to arrive before they offer their learned interpretations of how events fit into processes.

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