



Kitap Tanıtımı/ Book Review

Revolutions and Instabilities in the Middle East

L.E. Grinin, L. M. Isaev, A.V. Korotaev; Uchitel, 2016, p. 384

Reviewed by Kulpunai Barakanova*

Revolutions and Instabilities in the Middle East is a monograph that provides a reader with a sound knowledge regarding the Arab Spring. It explains Arab revolutions in a wide scope exploring its implication to the Middle East region and to the whole world. A number of books have been written on this topic and most of them are focused on particular Arab states. Unlike other works, the book examines the Arab Spring through sociology and history of the revolutionary theory whereas a myriad of studies utilize descriptive approach. Additionally, the work explicates both underlying and proximate causes of the Arab Spring that are crucial in comprehension of the revolutionary processes.

The book generally tests several pivotal hypotheses and attempts to answer several major questions regarding the revolutions. The first assumption is a trivial one, supposes that modernization in Egypt and Tunisia had motivated

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people to demand more of civil rights from ineffective governments². Authors having looked through high numbers of university graduates and internet users in the given countries, conclude that given states are modernized in sense of social and technological development. Thus, people under authoritarian regimes were/are well-versed in state's rights and responsibilities toward civilians in modern liberal-democratic world. When the system transgresses its borders and doesn't stop misuse its authority at the expense of ordinary civilians, people are deemed to be ready to embark on revolutionary actions. Another question tests when revolution has positive and when it has negative results. Authors argue that for state that has fragile and/or unsustainable political institutions, a revolution could bring about destructive consequences in a form of civil war, interethnic conflict, counterrevolution and etc. Thus, the formula "a revolution leads to democracy" turns to "a revolution leads to chaos". Revolutionary process in such states like Libya, Syria, and Yemen where interethnic conflicts have already existed, with the start of Arab Spring have involved into the new conflicts. The third hypothesis states that an absence of lucid presidential power transmission could induce revolution as well. The hypothesis relies on the case of Egypt highlighting Hosni Mubarak's case. Example of Mubarak indicates that wish of national leader to transmit presidential power to his son has triggered a mass resentment and consequently mass protests³.

Another important research question asks whether the democratic principles are universal for all world countries. The fact that most of the states involved in the Arab Spring, had been recognized as "democratic" states and considered being "modernized" creates a question in the mind regarding universality of democracy. Hence, according to authors when revolution came up, it did change nothing to the better but vice versa deteriorated the situation⁴. Authors here question theory of "revolution for modernization".

A structure of the book as well as approach reflects great attempt to explain important aspects of the Arab Spring in a meticulous way. It consists of a thorough introduction, six concise chapters, conclusion and two interesting

² L.E. Grinin, L. M. Isaev, A.V. Korotaev, *Revolutions and Instabilities in the Middle East*, Uchitel, Moscow, 2016, p.

³ *Ibid*, p.18

⁴ *Ibid*, p.19

appendices. The first part “Political Theory and the Middle Eastern Reality” includes two chapters: “Factors of Arab Revolutions” and “Revolutions, Counter-revolutions, and Democracy (on the example of Egypt)”. The second part “The Paradoxes of the Arab Spring” is made up of three chapters that are “The Syrian Dead-End”, “Nasty Arab Autumn”: Yemen between 2014 and 2015” and “Islamic State”—an Undesirable Child of the Arab Spring”. The third part “The Middle East and Instability in the World System” includes two chapters as “The Revolutionary Wave of 2013-2014 in the Middle East and in the World: A Quantitative Analysis”, “Upheavals in the Middle East and Reconfiguration of the World System”. The conclusion is called “Surprises and Contradictions of the Middle East”. The first appendix contains letters from Tahrir protest participant and the second one represents a chronology of the Arab Spring and “Arab Autumn” between 2010-2015.

An introduction that is called “Revolutions in the 21st Century: Pros and Cons...” includes a wide range of concepts and theories from modern age to present days. First of all, authors while embarking on introduction provide essential knowledge about the relations between revolution and modernization throughout the history. The focal approaches to study revolution have been given in a scrupulous way. Authors determine six basic approaches to study revolutions: psychological, functional, politico-juridical, the fourth wave of revolutionary study (includes autonomous role of state, a long run impact of external factors, the role of army and role of pluralist/authoritarian elites), the fifth wave that focuses on question why some regimes are more stable than others (refers to the significance of inter-elite conflict, unsustainability of interim government, revolutions mostly do not bring about democracy and economic development but prevent these), the six wave of revolutionary study focuses on color revolutions and the Arab Spring⁵.

The first part of the book that is called “Political Theory and Middle Eastern Realities” starts with the chapter “The Factors of the Arab Revolutions”. The chapter explicates a wide range of socio-political and demographic factors that have been thriving in Arab states during the last half of a century. The fast growth of population, a phenomenon of “the youth bulge”, astonishing progress in education sector and existence the great deal of illiterate people

⁵ Ibid, p. 11

at the same time, a radicalization of society, unemployment are some of those factors. Such social changes and processes have been accompanied with resentment in regard with the level of justice, distribution of wealth system, nepotism, and corruption. All in all, above mentioned factors are deemed as the underlying causes of the Arab revolutions whereas the global rise of prices on foodstuffs in 2010-2011 and active foreign interference into these countries are considered to be proximate causes of the Arab revolutions⁶.

The second chapter “Political Theory and the Middle Eastern Reality” is devoted to the theoretical analysis in regard with the correlation between revolutions and democracy. While analyzing these, authors rely on historical cases and particularly on the case of the Arab Spring in Egypt. Conclusion chapter summarizes that revolutions do not always end with democracy. It also indicates that transition to democracy requires a certain level of development, a certain mentality, and readiness of people. Otherwise, revolutions prevent democratic unfolding⁷.

The second part “The Paradoxes of the Arab Spring” indicates how peaceful protests suddenly have turned into bloody clashes, civil wars and have brought about foreign interference and fragmentation of society. The third chapter “The Syrian Dead-End” illustrates the evolution of Syrian conflict around which the great geopolitical game has broken out. This game involves a number of great powers such as the US, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, some of the European countries and many others. Authors argue “Islamic State” has emerged as a result of US operation in Iraq⁸.

The chapter four “Nasty Arab Autumn: Yemen in 2014-2015” is devoted to the Yemeni Arab Spring. Yemen emerged as an integrated state in 1990⁹. What makes Yemen different from other countries is a long civil war and fragile economy in comparison with the other Arab states. Thus, an attempt to install democracy in Yemen during the Arab Spring has affected and inflamed the old resentments. Yemen has entered into the new civil war that has been deteriorated with the intervention of the Gulf States. All

⁶ Ibid, p. 21

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ “Middle East: Yemen”, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ym.html>, (15.01.2017)

these advocate the presumption that efforts to install democracy just after the revolution in the states that are ethnically fragmented bring about the humanitarian catastrophe, destabilization and to a number of ethnic clashes. So that according to authors states that were relatively “stable” prior to revolutions came to absolute collapse and became a fertile place for terrorist organizations.

The chapter “Islamic State - an Undesirable Child of the Arab Spring” analyzes the geopolitical transformation of the Middle East through Nicholas Berdyaev rule that claims “all revolutions end up with the reactions”. Authors have utilized this rule to conclude that not only revolutions but “all interventions end up with reactions”. Hence, ISIS is deemed as a reaction to the Western and particularly the US intervention into the Middle East¹⁰.

The third part of the book “The Middle East and Instability in the World System” researches the influence of the world system on the transformation of Arab states. This part of the book analyzes the correlation between occasions in the Middle East and the global political changes. Additionally, book stresses a tie between unfolding events in the Middle East and the world system. As a result authors conclude that world system is gradually embarking on the reconfiguration.

Chapter six “The Revolutionary Wave of 2013-2014 in the Middle East and in the World: A Quantitative Analysis” compares the Arab Spring with the revolutions in the different parts of the world. Authors reveal two type of protest movements such as peripheral and central. Moreover, authors find some similarities between the Arab Spring and other revolutions around the globe. Chapter seven “Upheavals in the Middle East and Reconfiguration of the World System” is devoted to the research of the Arab Spring consequences that have been assessed from the revolution-modernization theoretical perspective. First of all, internal and global causes of revolutions have been inquired in a scrupulous way. Secondly, the influence of the Arab Spring on the future of the world system has been evaluated. Authors have mentioned in this chapter that synchronic revolutions are rare in the world history and whenever such process had emerged the transformation of the world system would follow. Hence, the turbulences in the Middle East mean the start of the large transformation in the world system¹¹.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.160

¹¹ Ibid, p. 290

The conclusion “Surprises and Contradictions of the Middle East” presents a concise summary of transformations in the Middle East. Authors highlight that quite wide foreign policy of the US and rapid changes in it cause unexpected and fast reactions around the world due to the phenomenon of globalization. Thus, the US actions are quite significant for the whole world and the US should be aware of it.

Despite to the number of merits of the book, the flaws also exist. First, authors highlight in chapter three “The Syrian Dead-End” that Arab authoritarian regimes were an obstacle toward radical terrorist organizations such as ISIS to act freely in the Middle East¹². However, looking through the causes of ISIS emergence, it seems that radical groups have emerged as a response to the alienation from the authoritarian regimes. For instance, while Nouri al-Maliki was in the power in Iraq, Sunni population particularly previous national militant elites were alienated due to mass exclusion from the army. Prior to the chapter three, authors stress that ISIS is a reaction or response to the US intervention. To be precise radicalization of the given group of people took place in the wave of US support to Shia versus Sunni elites (that was dominant before). So that new authoritarian regime was created artificially by the assistance of external power. Apparently, authoritarian regimes (also supported by external powers) induce emergence of radical movements¹³. It is not clear what authors mean by claim that previous authoritarian regimes used to preserve the emergence of terrorist groups in the Middle East. However, it worth to be noted that authors’ presumption that the external interference did play a role in creation radically-minded people seems to be sensible.

The second point is that authors did some minor mistakes referring Bahrain as one of the rich Arab states and referring Egypt as relatively thriving states in the Middle East. It is quite disputable due to authors don’t mention the economic indicators according to which they have evaluated the “richness” of these states. Moreover, the question of equal distribution of wealth in Egypt is highly disputable.

The third weak point is that writers seem to utilize some anti-West discourse. It could be seen in the last chapter called “Upheavals in the Middle East and Reconfiguration of the World System. Interestingly, they don’t mention

¹² Ibid, p. 42

¹³ Ö.B. Özdemir & R. T. Güreler, “Al-Kaide’den Post-Kaide’ye Dönüşüm: İŞİD”, Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, volume 1, no 1, 2014, p. 113-155

Russian involvement into the Arab Spring and its consequences. At this point, it is logical to question authors' objectivity as well.

All in all, in spite of such flaws the book deserves to be read because its merits prevail over flaws. The book contains thorough knowledge about the internal and external, remote and immediate reasons, regional and global consequences of the Arab Spring. The last part that is devoted to the reconfiguration of the world system is important to perceive the synchronically emerged Arab Spring phenomena from the new perspective and to admit the reconfiguration process as a part of the global change.