

BOOK REVIEW

The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of The New Middle East

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Marc Lynch is associate professor of political science and international affairs and the director of the Institute of Middle East Studies at the Georgetown University. His new book on the *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of The New Middle East* is a concise account of the events which unfolded in 2011 in the Middle East and generally referred as the 'Arab Spring'. As indicated in the title of the book, Lynch refrains from using the term 'Arab Spring' and prefers to call it 'Arab Uprising' instead since he thinks that the term 'Arab Spring' "does not do justice to the nature of the change" (p.9). He emphasizes what has been experienced by the Arab world from December 2010 to March 2011 was revolutionary, but not enough to be named as revolutions. The uprisings during that period have produced mixed results, but there is an ongoing process of structural change. In this vein, Lynch underlines the importance of the events for shaping the regional dynamics as he portrays the region as 'the New Middle East', but he cautions that no matter how revolutionary the developments under the Arab uprising may be, they are 'unfinished'. Then he ties the events of the Arab uprising and its implications on the US foreign policy in the Middle East with the argument that the region will not be the same after the uprisings driven by the 'new Arab public' so should be the US foreign policy. Lynch utilizes social media –twitter and blogs– as sources and cites his extensive experience in blogging since he, himself, is a blogger. His travels to the region during the uprisings constitute his other source of research. Furthermore, his close ties with the Obama administration provides insights based on inside information about the US approach to the events. Simultaneously, Lynch reflects points of view of a security adviser since he advised members of the Obama administration on the revolutions.

In addition to being an easy-readable narrative of the events of the Arab uprising, the book well situates the events in the historical context with a cause and effect relationship. Lynch approaches to the Arab uprising as a culmination of a long history of protests

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dating back to the 1950s. The single events like the death of Tunisian Muhammed Boazizi are the triggering events which sparked the historical social discontent against the authoritarian regimes in the region. He also reminds us that the social protests and political mobilization is not unprecedented in the history of the region. The exaggerated shock experienced all-over the world after the demonstrations in 2011 was the indication of how the history of the region is not known despite its popularity. As portrayed by Lynch, the region has witnessed several waves of activism, starting from 1950s until 2011. In the 1950s, people poured into the streets with the call for Arab unity. The late 1970s and 1980s were swept by bread riots and anti-austerity protests. There were the defensive democratization efforts in the 1990s and the protests of 'Kefaya wave' in the 2000s. However, none of these waves proved successful as they were replaced by new forms of authoritarianism.

Lynch regards 2000s and the *Kefaya* movement as the "essential training ground for the mobilization that finally broke through in 2011" (p.64). The name of the movement stemmed from the slogan *Kefaya*, meaning 'Enough'. The activists were against the 'dynastic' succession from Husni Mubarak (father) to Gamal Mubarak (son). Later on, the movement became a source of inspiration for the young activists beyond Egypt. The protests were tolerable at the beginning by the regimes as long as they were against Israel during the *intifada* and against US in its invasion of Iraq. Yet, when they turned against the authoritarian regimes, they became a source of problem which required immediate measures to tackle. These protests paved the wave for the 2011 Arab uprising when the young activists began to spread their messages and get organized via social media.

One of the most debated aspects of the Arab uprisings have been the role of social media. The protests and the demonstrations were caused neither by Facebook nor Twitter. Nevertheless the means of communication, not only the social media, but also the TV broadcasts and talk shows, namely in *Al-Jazeera*, had a facilitating role. They helped people gather together. More importantly, they contributed to increasing awareness regionwide, if not worldwide. As claimed by Lynch, the means of communication has created a new Arab public sphere, which is more interconnected than before. In fact, the 'new Arab public sphere' is a concept that Lynch identified almost a decade ago in his book on *Voices of the New Arab*

*Public.*¹ Lynch points out that the new Arab public has been transformed with the satellite television in the 1990s and the social media in the 2000s. Yet, although the means of communication contributed to the change of the Arab public, he does not overrate their role. Nonetheless, he devotes a part of a chapter in his book to the hashtag protests with which he intends to demonstrate how a casual coordination device in the beginning turned into a “symbol of unification of diverse national struggles into a single campaign” (p.105). The shared narrative of the uprisings via the hashtags appealed to every Arab involved in the new Arab public.

Lynch also makes a contribution to the current debates on the ‘New Arab Cold War’ in describing the current regional politics. ‘Arab Cold War’ is a concept coined by Malcolm Kerr that he used for describing inter-Arab politics in the 1950s and 1960s. The main feature of the Arab Cold War (in 1950s and 1960s) was the polarization of Arab politics between the revolutionary republics and conservative monarchies. Arab solidarity under the ideology of Pan-Arabism was promoted both by the revolutionary republics and popular movements against Western intrusion and Israel. Following the 1956 Suez War, an Egypt-centric Pan-Arab system prevailed in the region. The revolutionary wave raised under the leadership of Nasser became the source of threat for the pro-Western conservative monarchies in the Gulf as well as Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Until the early 1970s, the region remained polarized between the radical revolutionary republics and the status quo monarchies. Within this historical framework, scholars argue that the power struggles, the ideological and identity conflicts as well as the proxy wars are present in today’s Middle East, making it analogous to the pre-1967 regional order. The analogy of ‘New Arab Cold War’ in understanding and explaining current regional dynamics could be meaningful when it is based on the similarity that the conservative monarchies are trying to curb the wave of change in the regional system. On the other hand, re-considering inter-Arab politics and the popular demonstrations within the framework of the Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s is important in understanding the popular Arab uprisings and the regional dynamics today. The inter-Arab rivalry and the Arab public as its object led to more authoritarianism in the region in 1970s. In this vein, how the new inter-Arab rivalry and the new Arab public as

¹ Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, And The Middle East Politics Today*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

an agent of change make up a new regional context is a significant question. After the Arab Cold War of 1950s and 1960s, the Arab states have increasingly become police states where there is corruption and rule by intelligence services. Although starting from the 1990s (Egypt witnessed it earlier), the states began to introduce economic liberalization and limited political openings with regime survival motives, these initiatives only enriched and empowered ruling elites and thus fuelled social discontent. In this context, Lynch points out the emergence of a new Arab public during and after the Arab uprisings. Lynch differentiates the new Arab public from that of 1950s and 1960s by claiming that during the 1950s, the Arab public was an object of mobilization whereas the new Arab public has emerged as an agent involved in power politics. (p.33).

Against this historical background, Lynch delves into the Arab uprisings which started in Tunisia in December 2010. He pays special attention to the events in Tunisia and Egypt since he regards them as the drivers of change unfolded throughout the region. In regard to the Tunisian revolution, Lynch notes that it “had posed little true challenge to Washington or to the region” (p.84). There was not massive international involvement in the Tunisian case, but soon outside actors would get involved when the protests spread to the other Arab countries of strategic importance to every regional and global player like Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. In the Egyptian case, he underlines that the US was the key external player in persuading Mubarak to step down and engaging in dialogues with the Egyptian army not to use force against the protestors. For him, what saved the revolution in Egypt was the army’s positioning itself not to fire on the Egyptian people and the US had played a role in that. (pp.92-94).

In reference to the tidal wave created by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, he addresses the reverberations of these events, via the narrative of the hashtag protests, in other Arab countries like Yemen, Algeria, Bahrain, Libya, Oman, Morocco, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. (pp.104-124). Then he illustrates the responses of the governments to the uprisings in Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan and Yemen. In Bahrain, the response of the government was the brutal crackdowns whereas in Jordan and Morocco regimes chose to initiate reforms to limit the powers of monarchy and give more powers to the elected governments. In Yemen, Lynch asserts, the revolution stalls due to the loss of momentum with the lack of unity among the opposition groups. (pp.131-159).

When it comes to the two battlefields of the Arab uprising, Libya and Syria, he lays out how the peaceful protests yielded to brutal force, violence and civil war, bringing in the discussions of outside intervention. He notes:

For the first time in the history of the modern Middle East, Arab regimes and peoples alike rejected the claim that state sovereignty should shield Arab leaders who commit atrocities against their own people. The appeal for international intervention in Libya, the GCC's initiative in Yemen, and even the Arab League's belated appeal for a cease-fire in Syria all appealed to a radically new norm that regimes would lose their legitimacy when they crossed a threshold of domestic violence. This was obviously partial- Bahrain, for instance, was not included in the new concern. And it was only unevenly enforced- condemnation did little to protect Syrian and Yemeni victims of state violence. (pp.163-164).

Despite criticizing its uneven enforcement, Lynch refers to the regional acceptance of the global norm of 'Responsibility to Protect' as an incredible change for the region. He is also aware that aside from the unprecedented international (including regional) support, what made the intervention in Libya possible is its being on the margins of the regional politics and of little core strategic interests. When Syria is concerned, its unique place in the regional politics with its fate touching "on both of the great cold wars of this period – the one between Iran and the Sunni Arab states, and the one between the Arab public and its rulers" (p.166) complicates the efforts to achieve regional consensus against Assad. Therefore, underlying the complexity of the Syrian case as a "full-scale civil war fuelled by regional proxy competition and increasingly open activity cadre of Al-Qaeda inspired fighters" (p.249), Lynch stresses several reasons why there had not been an outside intervention in Syria such as the lack of international agreement to an intervention and the lack of a unified official opposition movement in the country. In regard to the US stance towards Syria, Lynch thinks that US has done what it could do so far: "to offer moral and rhetorical support and help build regional consensus against Assad, and shepherd international sanctions through the United Nations" (p.167). He also adds that if there is anything good about the disastrous situation in Syria, it is the US non-involvement in an active military intervention.

In addition to analyzing the Arab uprising in detail in each case, Lynch also evaluates the US policy in the region. He criticizes the

neoconservative turn in the US foreign policy with the Bush administration since it led to an increasing anti-Americanism in the region. In line with the US norms and values of liberty and democracy, President Obama wanted to be seen on the right side of the history with supporting the protests against the authoritarian regimes. Although he seems to favor the Obama administration in its approach to the Arab Uprising in countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, he underlines its failures in regard to the protests in Bahrain. US refusal to condemn direct Saudi military intervention in Bahrain ripped US of being consistent in its stance towards the uprising. In fact, it was not a mere revelation of inconsistency, but a blow to credibility of the US, though, not mentioned this way by the writer. Lynch goes on with a recommendation that US has to develop a new policy in regard to the changing dynamics in the region. Middle East, being reshaped by the Arab uprisings will be different from the past, and thus unfamiliar or unpredictable, and will be challenging for the US eventually. For the writer, what US should do is to embrace this region in the way it is changed by its people. In this respect, the new vision that US should develop, is to be based on “an approach to foreign policy that acknowledges other states and publics as equals and partners, not as objects or obstacles to overcome.” (p.235). In addition, Lynch proposes US to “accept the limits of its ability to control the Middle East” (p.234) and abandon its imperial habits regarding the region.

With demand for more democracy and political participation, the Arab political sphere will be open to competition between different political actors. Among them, the Islamists may appear more powerful for several reasons, some of which will be that they are well-organized, more popular and well-funded. In this respect, Lynch recommends that US should develop better policies in dealing with the Islamists. He assesses that the US government is doing better in understanding the Islamists and the Islamist movements compared to the days after the 9/11. He appreciates the way Obama administration engaged with the Islamists regarding their democratic participation and advocating non-violence, particularly in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt. At the same time, he admits that there is an anti-Islamic populism in the US and states that “combating anti-Islamic trend at home has never been a more urgent national security priority” (p.234). Furthermore, he recommends that the US should rethink its relations with Israel and encourage it for returning back to the negotiation table with the Palestinians. He also states

that it is high time for the US to engage in real public diplomacy in the Middle East.

Consequently, the book is a good narrative of the ongoing Arab revolts and therefore, is recommended to anyone interested in what has happened in the region so far and is curious about what is there to come. The book provides a comprehensive analysis of the Arab uprisings in relation to the historical activism in the region, but it is not a sophisticated theoretical monograph. Hence, it can appeal both to the specialist and non-specialist audience. The final point that needs to be noted is that although Lynch tries to expose the mistakes done by the US during the uprisings, his praise for the Obama administration seems to prove him unconvincing, particularly about the US efforts to stop the civil war in Syria.