
Reviewed by Billie Jeanne Brownlee

Almost nine years have passed since the start of the first popular protests in Tunisia. By early 2011, they had developed into what became known as the “Arab Spring,” a wave of protest and civil unrest that spread across the whole Middle East, from Morocco to Yemen. In spite of the optimism inherent to the expression “Arab Spring,” authoritarian rule proved to be a resilient to enduring mass-scale anti-government mobilization.

That is perhaps why, in the first place, the Arab uprisings of 2011 came as a surprise to all, including the vast majority of Middle East experts. As Gregory Gause argued, scholars working on the Arab world were too intent on studying Arab authoritarianism in the region to grasp the “forces for change that were bubbling below, and at times above, the surface of Arab politics.”1 Interestingly, almost nine years from the start of the first protests, the region continues to surprise Middle East experts, showing new waves of pro-democracy protests that have reached the capital cities of Algiers and Khartoum and have made their way back to Cairo in autumn 2019. The Arab revolts have proved that many of the paradigms and theories used to approach the region were inaccurate and that new interpretative frames are needed to understand the complexity of the region’s politics and society.

In Making the New Middle East, Valerie Hoffman, Professor and Head in the Department of Religion at Illinois University, explores critical aspects about the region’s politics, religion, gender dynamics, human rights and media and culture with the intent of providing more clarity to the way events unfolded in the region. As the editor explains, the word “new” in the title is attributed to the unprecedented new dynamics and outcomes of the upheavals, but I would add, refers also to a “new” approach by scholars working on the region. The book is an edited volume that brings together a diverse cohort of scholars who contribute to design
a comprehensive analysis of the Middle East, its politics and society. The outcome is an impressive mosaic of the region, captured through different disciplinary lenses and structured in four main parts: religion, politics and society; human rights; gender dynamics; and media and cultural expressions. The book is said to have originated in a conference, which took place at the University of Illinois back in 2012, on the social and political changes in the Middle East in the twenty-first century. Yet it is more than that. It is a refined, well-designed and up-to-date product, with other contributors brought into the edited volume following the conference. By starting each section (except the last one) with an introductory chapter, Hoffman maintains the thread about demands for freedom, justice and dignity throughout the different sections of the book. What she and the other contributors describe is a Middle East in continuous evolution, with new actors emerging and pushing for change and new places found (online and offline) to express discontent and call for action.

Part One explores the role of religion and politics in a number of important contexts: Iran’s Green Movement, the Arab Spring, Turkey’s March for Justice and the ongoing struggle in Palestine. Despite the different context of each of these cases, what emerges is a unifying call for freedom, justice and governability, which is yet to be concretized. Part Two of the book deals with the problems of minority rights in the Middle East. Tadros’ chapter on the rise of violent attacks against Copts in Egypt since the fall of Hosni Mubarak is particularly significant. It offers insights into Egypt’s thwarted transition to democratic rule and the risk of sectarianism unfolding as a consequence of the insecurity which follows the collapse of an authoritarian regime. Rubenberg’s chapter on the ongoing denial of justice for Palestinians by Israeli authorities in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza suits perfectly the overall goal of the book. Yet, it does not include more crucial events like Gaza’s Great March of Return and President Trump Peace Plan (also known as the Deal of the Century), which would contribute to the debate about the “making of the new Middle East.” The third section of the book looks at the changing gender dynamics happening in the region, from a social, legal, political and religious perspective. Marshall’s and Moghissi’s chapters are two complementary stories of a struggle for gender equality in the context of the establishment of Turkey’s republic and Iran’s Islamic republic. As history bears witness, women are often at the forefront of nationalist struggles, but they are very often relegated to secondary roles when power is consolidated. Part Four of the book explores the different ways in which the media and arts have turned into gaps within authoritarian regimes where people can express their aspiration for change. The three chapters offer an insight into ways in which the media and culture in Iran, literature in Morocco and music in Egypt defy autocratic regimes and provide a safety valve for social discontent.
All in all, *Making the New Middle East* makes an important contribution to the post-Arab Spring literature and the multi-layered struggles for justice, dignity and human rights that are being waged in the region. The book provides some excellent case studies about Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Palestine, yet skims over other fundamental contexts and struggles like those of Syria, Iraq, Libya or Yemen. Hence, the book risks bringing under the spotlight countries that are geopolitically salient while side-lining the scholarly pursuits of the emerging ecologies of political transformation. Overall, the book provides an accurate and in-depth look into the complex political and social change taking place in the region and the courageous struggle of people opposing authoritarian resilience. The book would enrich the reading list of modules on Middle East politics and society with interdisciplinary and multidimensional perspectives.

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