

Book Review*

The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East

Marc Lynch



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The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East is a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the causes of the Arab uprisings. The book opens with a quotation: “We are coming tonight. There won’t be any mercy”, a warning issued by the late Muammar Qaddafi to rebel leaders to show the reason of the international action. In this sense, while Lynch supports international intervention when necessary, he also condemns that intervention when it stokes violence. To this end, Lynch assesses the popular movements in the Arab world and the international response, both as it was and it should have been.

The author first deals with Obama’s decision regarding the uprisings in Libya. The Obama administration’s decision to join NATO and its Arab allies to intervene militarily in Libya stands today as a crucial turning point in the Arab uprisings - one with effects far beyond that country’s borders. According to Lynch, the lessons of that intervention remain deeply contested. The intervention succeeded in its short-term goal of protecting Libyan civilians by preventing a near-certain massacre, and helped to remove one of the nastier of the Arab dictators. He also deduces that had Obama not acted, America would certainly have been blamed for allowing the uprising to end in bloodshed. But acting, in turn, caused a whole set of other unintended problematic outcomes.

The author starts with Libya, rather than with the crisis in Syria or the Islamic State, because Libya was a decisive turning point, signalling the transformation of the Arab uprisings from peaceful domestic uprisings into a regional proxy war. Marc Lynch claims that Libya’s war offered the first violently cautionary tale against seeking democratic change after the dizzying success of protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt. He proffers two conclusions in this regard. Firstly, the NATO intervention showed Arab protesters and autocrats alike that armed insurrection could succeed by attracting external assistance. Secondly, it showed Arab powers that they could convince the West to back their ambitions with military might, but led Russia to block further such United Nations resolutions. He uses the case of the Libyan war to bolster his own argument that in general, international interference does

not produce peaceful outcomes. He points out that the uprising first collapsed into civil war, and then became an object lesson in the dangers of intervention and state failure.

When it comes to what conclusion we draw from the Arab Spring, the author emphasizes that one thing we most certainly did not get wrong was the epochal and fundamentally transformative nature of the uprisings. The five years since that historic eruption have been cruel to those who hoped for positive change in the Middle East. The entire regional order appears to be in freefall. He warns the reader that, "...these struggles should lead to sober reflections, but we must not take away the wrong lessons since many wrong lessons currently dominate the conventional wisdom," (p. 12).

For Lynch, the failure of the transitions does not prove that Arabs are not ready for democracy. In his own words, "Obama could not have saved Mubarak or stopped the Arab uprising if he had tried. There is no monarchical exception protecting the Gulf regimes from popular discontent. The resurgence of jihadist groups does not mean they were the real, hidden face of the uprising all along," (p. 13). However, we should not forget that stronger states are not the solution to the region's woes. As Lynch points out, autocratic regimes, in their single-minded pursuit of survival, are the root cause of the instability and have fuelled the region's extremism and conflicts. Moreover, the region's autocrats, from Damascus to Riyadh, are the problem not the solution.

This book ranges widely over the greater Middle East, from the tortured transitions in Egypt and Tunisia to the wars of Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. The author provides a framework for understanding the new politics of the region, explaining what went wrong and suggesting what to expect, rather than offering deeply detailed narratives of each individual country. He argues that these countries have become the central site of a regional proxy war. Those proxy wars and interventions have manifestly changed the dynamics of regional international relations, mostly in destructive and counterproductive ways.

This book's account of the new Arab wars offers a different way of making sense of the current regional situation. Lynch summarizes it thus: "the Arab uprisings have not failed; the Arab regimes have not restabilized and are not the solution; more forceful intervention would not have saved Syria; the failure of the

Muslim Brotherhood does not validate anti-Islamist views; and the Islamic State does not represent real Islam, but the challenge of jihadism will persist long after its state is destroyed,” (p. 245).

It is not certain whether Lynch’s claims will be borne out. We know that while autocrats may have clawed back their power in most Arab countries, none of the underlying problems have been solved, and most have gotten worse. Just as Lynch puts it, “We might not know exactly when and where the next eruption of mass protest appears, but another wave is almost certainly coming,” (p. 13).

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