

## Arab Winter

By Donna Robinson Divine

Marc Lynch, editor, *THE ARAB UPRISINGS EXPLAINED: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

James L. Gelvin, *THE ARAB UPRISINGS: What Everyone Needs To Know*, Second Edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

For years, autocratic rulers in the Middle East, warned that their regimes kept Islamists from wreaking havoc across the Arab lands. Headlines marking the daily toll of violence raging in so many of the region's cities and towns seem to confirm the dire warnings that only strong regimes can stop the chaos gutting economies, trashing infrastructures, and annihilating normal civilian life. With humanity betrayed in so many places, it is easy to forget the sense of excitement after a young Tunisian man, pouring gasoline over himself, ignited protests that skipped over borders and looked to many like a pan-Arab awakening for democracy and justice. Demonstrations did not simply draw their energy from the frustrations of the poor and young. They also gained their vitality from the notion that past successes would propel the ones coming next. But as events unfolded and dictators were deposed or killed, dictatorship, itself, seemingly retained its power and even its attraction. Thus the reasons for the protests and the factors that shaped them continue to make claims on the lives of the people in the Middle East and also on those of us who are trying to understand where they are taking a region that intersects with our own in so many ways. Two Middle East specialists—Marc Lynch and James L. Gelvin—who have commented widely on these events, have now published books that show us how to interpret trends often buried by reports of newly broadcast acts of barbarism.

Since the demonstrations began, Marc Lynch, a renowned expert on the impact of media on public discourse in the Arab World, has published articles and books explaining what the people who put their lives on the line wanted. When Lynch published *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions in the Middle East* in 2012, he embedded his argument—and hopes—in the title, providing more than a hint that a trajectory of liberation was in place for countries untouched by past democratic “waves.” But if titles project views, his recently edited volume—*The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*—suggests a less hopeful turn in his narrative and less certainty about political directions in the region.

For the last several decades, the political science literature on the region concentrated on the resilience of entrenched authoritarianism, the relative weakness of civil society, and the apparently limited effect of the diffusion of novel norms and ideas through new information and communication technologies. The first responses to the uprisings probably overstated their novelty and scope in the heat of enthusiasm for long-denied popular challenges...The dizzying pace of the Arab spring has now slowed to a gritty, desperate, and increasingly set of interlocked battles for power. [2]

A cutting edge political scientist who watches *al-Jazeera*, reads major blogs in Arabic, and exchanges tweets with activists across the religious and political divides, Lynch has brought together a group of leading political scientists to reflect on whether their discipline provided an accurate view of the architecture of power before and after the attempts to transform what was deemed by so many as corrupt and hated regimes. Lynch sees in the spread of the new media in the Middle East the ground work for new forms of communication and the beginning of a new kind of public discourse. But he recognizes that words, alone, cannot carry out political transformations, no matter how vital the Internet has become in Arab societies. One does get the sense that Lynch is rooting for those who have adopted these modern technologies and the ideas they are now

purveying. Lynch also points out that political scientists have been examining the authoritarian politics in the region for decades, and while there were signs that the power of these regimes was fraying, the size and extent of the popular demonstrations caught almost everyone by surprise.

The evidence that misery is deepening in the Arab world is not much disputed. The much publicized and respected UN Development Reports drew attention to the region's deficits of freedom, education, and health. What was not known is how many deficits regimes had the power to impose. So this recently published volume focuses on what political science got right and what it got wrong about the region. Most experts did not predict so total and rapid a descent into chaos in so many of these countries nor that such turmoil would so quickly drive large numbers back into the embrace of authoritarian rule. The larger subtext of the book, then, is what political science can tell us about the rise and fall of autocratic regimes and ultimately, what combination of factors can bring democracy and genuine freedom to such societies.

Aside from interrogating the politics of the Middle East, *The Arab Uprisings Explained* is an omnibus of social scientific scholarship. The book brings together a careful presentation of important work on the transition to democracies and on whether the comparative perspectives on revolutions can provide explanations for why some transformations succeed and some fail. There is a considerable body of scholarship that is useful to understanding the sequencing of the demonstrations and why some have turned so violent while others have petered out. By acknowledging that public discourse, no matter the extent of its transformation, is insufficient to explain the uprisings, the collection is compelled to take the measure of other reasons that may have sparked the demonstrations and the subsequent turmoil. These factors—from banking and credit

facilities, elections and regime strategies of control, Islamist and labor movement activities, military and security service interests, public views of government and politics with special attention to youth cohorts, and to regional interactions—are deftly analyzed by scholars who offer revealing connections between these recent upheavals and longer term trends in the Middle East. The book, reflecting the recent turn in political science to geography, also includes a superb chapter providing insight into the reasons why standing on common ground can mislead people into thinking they share the same interests and goals.

The premises guiding political science theories on government transitions are probed in an early chapter that focuses on the reasons why Arab states have not followed developmental models drawn from the experiences in other parts of the world: Arab rulers are charged with carrying out a nationalist mission; many governments can live off the so-called rents they receive from oil or natural gas and so are not as beholden to citizens as are governments depending on taxes for their operations. Finally, the chapter notes that religious and ethnic minorities are frightened by the prospect of a genuine democracy where the will of the majority might actually prevail and deny them the privileges they may have grabbed by acquiescing to authoritarian rule as the best of all the realistic alternatives confronting them.

The utility of the transitional models is tested in a chapter that begins by isolating the critical and common elements shaping the Eastern European transitions between 1987-1990, hoping to see in the experiences in that part of the world evidence for what did or did not happen in the Middle East. The similarities and differences of both regions help demonstrate why a call for freedom in some countries could instill hope and why, in others, engender fear. While such an inquiry does not yield a fully developed theory

about such transitions, it does show that these kinds of upheavals lend themselves quite well to the comparative method.

[M]any of the same regional factors that propelled the European and Eurasian waves also were present in the MENA [Middle East and North Africa]. [These include] striking similarities among political and economic regimes in the region, a common language, and the presence of a large number of long-serving and very corrupt leaders. (At the same time the wave began, some of them were in the process of positioning their sons to be their successors.) Also similar as a regional driver of diffusion was the decision by the US after 9/11 to pursue a two-track policy in the MENA by combining its long-term support for authoritarian incumbents with expanded democracy assistance and increased pressures on some of the leaders to introduce democratic reforms. ...[W]hile Tunisia was widely viewed in the region as an atypical country...it became unusually influential because the protests had managed to take place and even succeed in such an authoritarian context. [P. 63]

There is a consensus that can be drawn from the collection: toppling dictators does not necessarily end dictatorships. The recent protests never coalesced into the kind of active and sustained movement necessary for democratic transitions—with the possible exception of Tunisia—and so political hierarchies held sway. Put another way by Marc Lynch: "the upheavals in the region do not yet constitute revolutions" nor did they bring any more stability than democracy to the Arab World. The people might want an end to their corrupt and dictatorial regimes, but they had not yet formed the institutions that could put their wishes into practice.

*The Arab Uprisings Explained* makes its arguments, typically, by counting and not so much by telling stories. Because stories contain one kind of truth and numbers another, many scholars mix and match, telling representative stories and backing them up with aggregate data. Drawing on material from both people and trends, James L. Gelvin, in *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs To Know*, chronicles what has gone wrong with the Arab politics and also with efforts to change their course. Gelvin, whose substantial and wide-ranging body of work encompasses studies of early Syrian

nationalism as well as important general histories of the Middle East, is determined to rescue the rise and fall of these protests from the stereotypes consigned them by initial reports from the scene. What renders his narrative particularly fresh and compelling is its sensitivity to the human dimension and the deep knowledge of the region and its culture he brings to his discussions.

Gelvin's book, like that of some of the essays in the Lynch collection, points out that popular uprisings in the Arab world are not new and therefore there are lessons to be learned from history. As a historian, Gelvin is more inclined to connect the past with the present than to provide a trajectory for the future. And while Gelvin is comfortable examining some of the reasons for the timing and outcomes of the uprisings in the Middle East, he focuses his book on establishing the connections between the Arab present and the Arab past. Historians are less likely than political scientists to measure the scales of inequality, but when they do, they examine them to see how they affect the social and political structures that sustain life. Gelvin points out how several trends—demographic and economic—were too strong for the mechanisms of government, however, repressive, to control or contain. And where governments had access to material resources that could be distributed to ease the pain or where they had the capacity to wield sufficient terror or weapons against the people, the protests were contained or descended into civil wars.

Gelvin's argument about the uprisings begins by providing some basic information about the religious and ethnic identities living in a part of the world that eventually became the object of European conquest, subjugation, and exploitation. Colonial ambitions and interests imposed a map on the region that most of the politicians deemed illegitimate but which has endured. The idea that Europe introduced divisions

into an area that wanted to be united shaped the region's dominant discourses and course of political developments in the second half of the twentieth century when most of these countries won their formal independence from a Great Britain and France too traumatized by years of war and too impoverished to pay the ever-increasing costs to control their territorial empires. The age of colonialism was turned into an era of revolution as military coups in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Yemen brought to power leaders who proclaimed a new dawn for the region and promised justice, dignity, and opportunity for all. Here is Gelvin's description of how utopian prospects eventually brought disaster to Egypt.

Using resources derived from widespread nationalizations (including the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956), a \$42.5 million loan from the IMF and \$660 million in aid from the United States, Egypt adopted a program its leader, Gamal Abd al-Nasser, called "Arab Socialism". Under Arab socialism, the state became the engine of the economy. By mid-1960s, the Egyptian government owned and ran banks, insurance companies, textile mills, sugar-refining and food-processing facilities, air and sea transport, public utilities, urban mass transit, cinemas, theaters, department stores, agricultural credit institutions, fertilizer producers and construction companies. If measured by profit, state control over so much of the economy was highly inefficient. By administering so many productive and commercial establishments, the Egyptian state...was able to allocate resources for its own purposes and gain control over industries it deemed vital for national development. Furthermore, the Egyptian government significantly reduced the ranks of the unemployed....[I]n 1961, the Egyptian government passed the Public Employment Guarantee Scheme which...guaranteed every university graduated a job in the public sector...amended three years later to include all graduates of secondary technical schools. The result was as one might expect: the Egyptian bureaucracy...swelled from 350,000 in 1952 to 1.2 million in 1970. Although the government repealed the bill in 1990 after IMF prodding, the bureaucracy continued to grow. As of 2008, the government employed approximately 5 million Egyptians. [Pgs.14-15]

The book's chief and authoritative contribution is its careful presentation for a popular audience of the important work on the erosion, in the past several decades, of so many forms of social and economic support—subsidies for gasoline and education—for the middle class and particularly for the growing number of young men whose lives are on hold as they wait for employment and marriage. The so-called 'waithood' condition for

many did not prevent families from privileged backgrounds from gaining the kind of education that deepened both inequality and grievances in these countries. Gelvin refutes the commonplace explanations for the uprisings by emphasizing that they were not predicted because such events are essentially unpredictable. Even the celebration of human rights and democracy cannot be invoked as the sole drivers of these uprisings. There has been a tendency to regard these uprisings as part of the natural order—hence the term 'Arab Spring', a metaphor reflective of events in Prague in 1968, seemingly signifying that the Arab masses, like their counterparts in Eastern Europe, longed to be citizens and would never be bullied back into passivity and submission. For Gelvin, the massive protests were not so much reflective of underlying forces playing themselves out as the result of individuals who decided to risk their lives and confront the dictators ruling over them.

After exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the standard interpretations of the uprisings, Gelvin reckons directly with the events in several of the countries, pairing them to uncover the reasons for what could be claimed as success and for what must be admitted as failures. In comparing Tunisia and Egypt, Gelvin examines why and how a popular uprising that forced the ouster of an Arab ruler could have an impact on people in Egypt who wished to bring down their own corrupt regime. People watched on *al-Jazeera* that protests erupting in a small town could be carried into an Arab capital and for the first time, force an Arab dictator to flee the country he had until then treated as his private estate.

But none of the people calling for demonstrations on January 25 could be certain of the outcome or of the depth of support for their calls for an end to Mubarak's reign. Here Gelvin connects what happened in Tahrir Square to past attempts to mobilize

opposition to the regime, focusing on the ways some organizations were able to combine political and economic objectives. Young men and women imbued with a discourse of human rights created a framework for supporting the rights of workers endorsing their strikes and their demands for higher salaries and better working conditions. The failure of these earlier efforts prepared the ground for subsequent successes, however short-lived, including the forced resignation of President Husni Mubarak. And while the current regime's policies seem hostile to the spirit of the uprisings, they, too, may have to accommodate interests and demands born in a struggle for more freedom and more opportunity.

Gelvin joins together Libya with Yemen, deeming them failed states and so the death or ouster of a dictator could not quell violence in the absence of civil institutions that would be expected to manage the affairs of state. Nor could the mantra—the people want the end of the regime—no matter how often repeated—produce harmonious relations in a country torn by longstanding and deeply held religious and ethnic grievances. While international intervention toppled the cartoonish regime of Col Muammar el-Qaddafi, exposing him to a very public and unceremonious death that went viral via i-phones, those military operations were insufficient to prevent the country from becoming fertile ground for newly empowered radical Islamist movements taking advantage of the chaos and moving in for the kill. The outcome has been a greater humanitarian disaster than the one that the international intervention was intended to forestall. Yemen has also descended into turmoil, and its violence may not be containable by any set of borders no matter how widespread the international consensus on their legitimacy. Partly because the country sits astride a critical waterway with sea lanes used by many countries, the

potential for civil and regional war is generally high but now it is magnified by a struggle for power.

How a narrative of emancipation born in Tahrir Square and instantly tweeted around the world became both an instrument of liberation and empowerment and then a medium of submission is an important story, and although it has not yet been completely told, these two scholars tell it as well as it can be told at present. It is a story that must be probed and revised many times because the questions raised by these events are so critical. They must be asked even when the answers are not yet readily available.

DONNA ROBINSON DIVINE is Morningstar Family Professor of Jewish Studies and Professor of Government, emerita, Department of Government, Smith College.

[http://www.smith.edu/mes/faculty\\_divine.php](http://www.smith.edu/mes/faculty_divine.php)