

BOOK REVIEW: FALSE DAWN: PROTEST, DEMOCRACY, AND VIOLENCE IN THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

In False Dawn Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East, Steven A. Cook examines the trajectory of events in four countries, – Turkey, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt – to elucidate why the Middle Eastern uprisings failed, and why they should not be construed as “revolutions.” Cook argues that despite appearances, there were no true revolutions in the Middle East, since none of the affected societies underwent social revolutions, and the old structures of power were never eliminated. He refers to identity crises and sticky institutions as the main reasons for the lack of structural change. The author also analyzes the role of US foreign policy and asserts that American influence is quite limited in the region. Therefore, he suggests that Washington can utilize development-based programs rather than governance programs to play the long game.*

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* Steven Cook, *False Dawn Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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Due to their unpredictable nature, revolutions are difficult to theorize. Prior to the outbreak of a revolution, analysts are often predisposed to assert why it would not happen, and they overestimate regime survival and authoritarian resilience. But once the revolution occurs, analysts *a posteriori* cling to rationalizations of why it was meant to take place, while enthusiastically “wondering of the moment.” This was without a doubt the case with the analyses on the Arab Spring, which extolled the role of social networking platforms and misleadingly labeled the uprisings as “Twitter Revolutions.”

The uprisings in the Middle East caught many experts off-guard, as much of the scholarship concentrated on the durability of authoritarianism.¹ Once the dust settled, analysts began to offer explanations to upheavals that reverberated throughout the region with respect to economic grievances, perception of social injustice, and cronyism and networks of privilege, among others.² In his recently published book, Steven A. Cook meticulously cracked open a door that illuminates the way in which policy advisors, academics, and op-ed commentators perceived the uprisings with a kind of self-reflection on “ivory towers on sand.”³ Drawing upon a variety of literature on revolutions and democratic transitions – combined with his personal experience with the upper echelons of policy-making in the US and the Middle East – Cook provides insight into the obstacles of democratic transitions: sticky institutions and unresolved identity crises (also manipulated for political gains).

Despite their vast socio-political differences, the author examines Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Turkey and draws similarities between their trajectories of political and economic development. “The story of the present Middle East is not about the specific leaders, the incompetence of oppositions, or the utter perfidy of extremists,” argues Cook with his institutionalist perspective. Cook goes on to say:

The Arab Spring and Turkey’s liberalization never really were. The conjuncture of uprisings, but not revolutions, and the institutional environments begat instability and violence, accentuating identity politics in the region, producing more bloodshed and thwarting the dream of democratic transitions.

¹ Eva Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective.” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 36 (2004), pp. 139-157.

² Lisa Anderson, “Demystifying the Arab Spring: Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June (2011). Eva Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 44 (2012), pp. 127-149; Gregory Gause, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August (2011).

³ Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001).

While scrutinizing the repercussions of the Arab Spring, the crux of the issue for Cook is that there has still been no structural change – the prevailing socioeconomic relations has remained intact in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Turkey. In other words, as old power structures were not eliminated, these uprisings cannot be construed as “revolutions.” Even in the case of Tunisia, which has been praised as the only success story of the Arab Spring, the process of democratization is fragile and has its own ebbs and flows. In this vein, Cook portrays a gloomy picture of the region’s prospects for democratization. By the same token, in his recent book titled, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, Asef Bayat claims that the Arab Spring was different from 20th century revolutions, since it did not entail “rapid and radical transformation of the state through popular movements.”⁴

Generally, I agree with Cook’s pessimistic argument of “no structural change.” However, he downplays the significance of revolutionary moments and how they have altered the political landscape in the region. Although he gives credit to these protests as “deeply moving and transformative personally,” he overlooks its collective impact. These mobilization methods are now incorporated into what sociologist Charles Tilly calls, a “repertoire of contention.”⁵ Although poor in their strategy of transformation, these popular movements were rich in tactics of mobilization thanks to their flexible and horizontal organization. Cook skillfully detects the pitfalls of post-Arab Spring governance amidst the euphoria of revolutionary moments, yet he underestimates the irreversible impact of the Arab Spring, especially in Tunisia, as it created a space for public criticism of policy-making and public debate. Secondly, there has been a seismic shift in the “ruling bargains” in these countries.⁶ For example, Mehran Kamrava⁷ argues that the ruling bargains evolved to include political Islam, nationalism, electoral legitimacy, and delivery of economic goods and services in the post-Arab Spring era.⁸ It is not just the evolution of ruling bargains that matters, but the way they changed also varies by country.

Cook pinpoints similarities between his case studies in terms of historical trajectories and outcomes of uprisings, by delineating a detailed historical genealogy of these

⁴ Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

⁵ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (New York: Cornell University, 1994).

⁶ The concept of “authoritarian ruling bargain” refers to a social contract between the authoritarian incumbent and the ruled. Under this arrangement, the ruled traded their rights to independent political activity in return for the rulers’ guarantee of social welfare and job security.

⁷ Mehran Kamrava is Professor and Director of the Center for International and Regional Studies at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service in Qatar.

⁸ Mehran Kamrava, “The Rise and Fall of Ruling Bargains in the Middle East” in *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East*, edited by Mehran Kamrava (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp 17-46.

events. Be that as it may, he overlooks serious structural differences across cases to make his point of the lack of real transformations in the aforementioned countries' socio-political systems. The democratization processes might have failed in these countries, but the way in which they failed matters more than the outcome because it leads to certain path-dependencies and future variations. As a researcher whose agenda focuses on variations in the political economies of countries in the region, I firmly believe that one of the reasons why scholars were not attuned to foresee the Arab Spring lies in the fact that existing theoretical frameworks have not been calibrated enough to elucidate this vital intra-regional variation (especially in the ruling bargains) and usually come up with uniform blanket explanations.⁹

I also suggest that the overall gist of Cook's account for the Arab Spring overemphasizes structure, and neglects agency. Indeed, he states that the authoritarian leaders "were neither masters of strategic manipulation nor bumbling fools," and their responses were "fundamentally ad hoc." However, structuralist accounts usually disregard the definite effect of contingent events and decisions. In fact, the author asserts that "activists, democrats, liberals, and would-be revolutionaries made mistakes is a given, but they were beaten almost from the start. Their collective failure was itself a product of the authoritarianism they resist." This post-hoc argument might sound catchy, but any event that seems obvious and inevitable now is the result of a series of contingent decisions. The current status of Middle Eastern studies does not warrant overly structuralist accounts that provide rationalizations of why the Arab Spring was doomed to fail. Rather, it needs a detailed clarification of why certain actors/organizations behaved in a certain way, which eventually led to variations in the outcomes of Arab Spring.

US policy experts often struggle to accommodate Turkey's Justice and Development Party's (AKP) policies within the framework of their understanding of the Islamist-secularist divide extrapolated from the Middle Eastern politics. However, Cook has always been an attentive follower of Turkish politics, and so does not fall into the trap of evaluating Turkish politics with this binary lens of the Islamist-secularist rift. Yet despite his institutionalist analytical perspective, he cannot discern variations in the outcomes of Arab Spring with respect to Islamist politics and their institutional background. For instance, in contrast with Egypt's majoritarian electoral system, Tunisia's list-based proportional system avoided concentration of power and rendered coalition-building more possible.¹⁰ This is one of the institutional reasons why the Tunisian political system has been able to accommodate new Islamist

⁹ For a similar critique, see Melani Cammett, "The Political Economy of Development in the Middle East" in *The Middle East* (13th Edition), edited by Ellen Lust (California: CQ Press, 2013), pp. 161-208.

¹⁰ Kristen Kao and Ellen Lust, "Why did the Arab Uprisings Turn out as They Did? A Survey of the Literature" *POMED*, August, (2017), pp. 1-14.

politics – despite the obvious challenges and moments of crises. This in turn has also affected the public view of Islamist parties in a number of ways. For example, the Arab Barometer data indicated that trust in *Ennahda* (Tunisia’s Muslim democratic political party) fell only slightly from 40 percent to 35 percent after the Jasmine Revolution in early 2011, while a 23-point decline in trust for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was recorded.¹¹

Another important aspect of Cook’s analysis is related to US foreign policy towards the Middle East. The gloomy picture he demonstrates is also instrumental for justifying his policy position. In a nutshell, the author puts forward the view that the political environment in the region is not conducive for American diplomacy, and that the US should not even try to resolve high-stake struggles in the region. This is a maverick argument from someone highly involved in the American policy ecosystem, which also resonates with the secular-minded Turkish citizens’ foreign policy preferences about the Middle East. The author also suggests that the US should invest in technical assistance programs rather than good governance/democracy promotion programs, which according to the author, have not worked. He prioritizes development-based programs over good governance, by making an analogy with British colonial reforms in Egypt that engendered the emergence of a technocratic class for Egyptian nationalist movement. In a nutshell, this is a purely modernist and crude view of political change. As a civil society activist, I am acquainted with the fact that it is challenging to measure the impact of programs like good governance, even though I argue for their positive impact, especially within the context of shrinking human rights space in authoritarian settings. However, it is one thing to criticize the effectiveness of these programs, and another to suggest a developmentalist agenda in a neo-colonialist fashion.

With its powerful narrative of events that unfolded in the region, *False Dawn: Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East* is an important contribution to Middle Eastern studies and a must-read for students. Cook does not just rely on a significant literature review to put forward his arguments, but also provides insight into why policy advisors failed to foresee the Arab uprisings. Despite his overemphasis on structural inevitabilities, the author’s take on these uprisings and the role of US foreign policy to navigate through these political challenges enhances our understanding of power dynamics in the region. Needless to say, his ideas will certainly be echoed in the political firmament of Washington, as well as other capital cities in the MENA region.

¹¹ Michael Robbins, “When it comes to democracy, Egyptians hate the player but Tunisians hate the game” *POMEPS Studies*, Vol. 18 (2016) pp. 69-71.