



MARC LYNCH, JILLIAN SCHWEDLER & SEAN YOM (eds.), *The Political Science of the Middle East: Theory and Research Since the Arab Uprisings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 320.

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After the "Arab Spring", a significant number of peer-reviewed articles, books, workshops, and conferences sought to comprehend, scrutinize, and theorize the extraordinary series of events that caught the region's specialists off guard. Yet no book has synthesized the findings and reflected on these remarkable quantities of scholarly works. *The Political Science of the Middle East: Theory and Research Since the Arab Uprisings*, published by Oxford University Press, brings together more than

forty scholars from within and outside the Arab region to address this gap. This book review essay begins by outlining the main ideas and arguments of the book, dividing them into three broad research themes: authoritarianism, conflict and armies, and the state. It then highlights the value of these contributions as well as their limitations.

Research Objectives and Main Arguments

This edited volume seeks three primary aims. First, it identifies the new directions that the Arab uprisings have sparked in the study of the Middle East, both in domestic politics and international relations. It thus pays particular attention to "the theoretical developments, methods, and data which emerged"¹ in the field of political science since the Arab uprisings. Central to this objective is the need to surpass the conventional exceptionalism lens that has historically characterized much of Western scholarship on Middle East politics. Second, the book highlights the necessity of "regional expertise"² for knowledge production in political science. This is particularly salient because Middle East political science has been subject to excessive critique in the US academia and politics as "prone to insularity, resistance to methodological innovations... preference for rich description over theoretical rigor... overpoliticization, and failure to anticipate the most important events and trends in the region" such as the Arab uprisings.³ In other words, the book aims to demonstrate how the development of political science can be fostered theoretically and empirically through Middle East political science. Third, during the past decade, Middle East political science in US universities has become more inclined towards "intellectual collaboration"⁴ and pluralism that transcend the traditional work division between "indigenous" data collectors and Western-based "theoreticians", which

1 Marc Lynch, "Introduction: The Project of Middle East Political Science: Research Agendas for a Maturing Field," in: Marc Lynch, Jillian Schwedler & Sean Yom (eds.), *Political Science of the Middle East: Theory and Research Since the Arab Uprisings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 4.

2 "Preface and Acknowledgments," in: Lynch, Schwedler & Yom (eds.), p. vii.

3 Lynch, "Introduction."

4 Ibid., p. vii.

Mona Abaza, the Egyptian sociologist, described as a labour division.⁵ The book is a successful attempt to affect intellectual collaboration.

To meet these objectives, the book is structured in 12 chapters: an introductory chapter by Marc Lynch, ten thematic chapters, with collaboration among more than forty scholars, in addition to and a concluding chapter by Lisa Anderson. The chapters ultimately fall (directly or indirectly) under one of four broad themes that typically dominate the research agenda in Middle East political science: (1) Authoritarianism in the region; (2) The role of religion in Middle East politics; (3) The study of armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA); and (4) The state in the Arab world.

The "New Face" of Post-2011 Middle East Authoritarianism

The study of democracy, or rather its absence, in the region, has been an essential subject in Middle East political science at least since the 1980s. In particular, scholars have long considered MENA as one of the most suitable world regions for studying, developing, and testing theories related to the resilience of authoritarian regimes.⁶ The initial stages of the Arab uprisings have questioned the validity of these claims of resilience, yet the subsequent democratic backsliding has reinvigorated this thesis. Central to the study of regimes in the region today is knowing to what extent the current authoritarian regimes in the Middle East resemble those of the pre-2011 era. According to Bank et al.,⁷ the research on this topic shows two new trends. First, there is a strong tendency toward regime personalization, meaning that "both republics and monarchies, have become even more personalized" than they were in the pre-2011 era.⁸ Second, using technology as a tool of control and repression has become a new characteristic of the region's authoritarianism.⁹

The critical role of technology, specifically social media, is emphasized in Allam et al.'s chapter on protest movements.¹⁰ The interest of scholars in the role of modern technologies in contemporary politics is not a new research subject. With the Arab uprisings of 2011, Middle East political scientists have started to take the study of this topic, especially social media, more seriously since those events are believed to be "some of the first mass movements to be at least partly organized through online platforms".¹¹ However, with the dramatic ends of most of the politically motivated protest movements in the MENA during the last decade, scholars have started to turn their attention to what is labelled the "non-revolutionary" forms of protest or "the routine protests". An interesting new trend here appears to be the analysis of role-played emotions as a dependent variable.¹² Clearly, more research is needed on how emotions trigger political behaviour in the MENA region.

Conflicts, Armies, and the Emergence of New Actors

In Middle East political science, the study of armed conflicts is perhaps the oldest research topic. The emergence of "Middle East Politics" as a subfield in the 1950s and 1960s in US academia was associated

5 Mona Abaza, "Academic tourists sight-seeing the Arab Spring," *Ahramonline*, 26/9/2011, accessed on 24/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3PoCvRs>

6 André Bank et al., "Authoritarianism Reconfigured: Evolving Forms of Political Control," in: Lynch, Schwedler & Yom (eds.), p. 35.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 41.

9 Ibid., p. 46.

10 Nermin Allam et al., "Between Two Uprisings: The Study of Protest in the Middle East, 2010–20," in: Lynch, Schwedler & Yom (eds.), pp. 62–85.

11 Ibid., p. 65.

12 Ibid., p. 63.

with the growing interest of American policymakers in the region and initial US involvement there. In the chapter co-authored by Darwich et al.,¹³ the authors argue that three major trends reflecting the region's new political configurations can be identified in the international relations literature of post-2011. First is the reconfiguration of the regional power balance with a diminishing US role in the Middle East, changing alliances, and rising regional powers. Second is the emergence of several intra-state civil conflicts fed by foreign interventions. Third is the growing role played by non-state actors with their own goals and logic of actions. Some cases, such as in Syria, those non-state actors have become even more powerful than the internationally recognized government.¹⁴ Yet the post-2011 bloody politics cannot be studied without particular attention to the militaries.

In the fifth chapter "Militaries, Militias, and Violence," Holger et al.¹⁵ reviewed the major progress in research on the behaviour of military leaders. A particularly striking element is how the military leadership's response to the 2011 popular uprising bewildered scholars with a theoretical paradox. Their response challenged existing theories on civil-military relations in the region, as the consequences of their choices and decisions (for instance on how to deal with the protesters) were significantly divergent. Another aspect that they highlight is how "emerging forms of governance [in post-2011] involving both state and nonstate armed organizations have challenged long-standing distinctions between state and nonstate actors".¹⁶ In sum, the study of armed organizations in the Middle East during the last decade not only questions the traditional approach based on the distinction between state and non-state actors; but also emphasizes the need to take the fundamental differences between regional armies more seriously.¹⁷

Identity Politics: Is Religion Central to Middle East Politics?

The place of religion in Middle East politics is a theme covered by three chapters (7, 8, and 9). While often a secondary research topic in political science worldwide,¹⁸ religion, "particularly the political implications of Islam, have been [...] central to the political science of the Middle East and North Africa".¹⁹ Of particular interest is the study of Islamist political organizations such the Muslim Brotherhood that gained new momentum after the Arab uprisings of 2011. The seventh chapter by Masoud et al.²⁰ reflects on the so-called inclusion-moderation thesis of Islamist parties. Traditionally, the theorization of the political relevance of Islam has oscillated between seeing it as a trigger of submission to authoritarianism, favouring anti-democratic values, and as feeding the violence of jihadist groups.²¹ Yet with Islamist parties winning elections in the wake of the uprisings and forming governments in Tunisia and Morocco, and even electing a president in Egypt, academia started to "assess the effects of such electoral participation on those movements",²² the impact of electoral success on a more moderate political agenda. Answering such questions was made possible with the unprecedented development of polling in the region and the available data on public

13 May Darwich et al., "International Relations and Regional (In)security," in: Lynch, Schwedler & Yom (eds.), pp. 86-107.

14 Ibid., p. 86.

15 Holger Albrecht et al., "Militaries, Militias, and Violence," in: Lynch, Schwedler & Yom (eds.), pp. 108-131.

16 Ibid., p. 108.

17 Ibid., pp. 108-109.

18 Masoud, Tarek et al., "Islam and Islamism," in: Lynch, Schwedler & Yom (eds.), p. 156.

19 Ibid., p. 157.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., p. 159.

22 Ibid., p. 161.

opinions, such as the Arab Barometer and the Arab Opinion Index.²³ One of the crucial findings is "that Islamic attachments generally had little bearing on Arab political attitudes".²⁴

Religion is also present in the study of politics of identity and sectarianism in the MENA region. According to Fanar et al. the "2011 popular uprising left an indelible mark on the politics of identity in the ME...it appeared that sectarian sentiments had come to dominate the regional public sphere... Yet not a decade later, a far different image emerged."²⁵ They later warn against conceptualizing Arab countries as a collection of religious sects or sectarianism as an innate characteristic of Middle East societies. Therefore, it is sectionalization, as "the process by which sect-based differences become politicized",²⁶ that is worthy of study rather than sectarianism. The claims made by primordialist conceptualizations of identity regarding the role of religion in the MENA region, they argue, should be categorically dismissed,²⁷ as evidenced by the "second wave" of the Arab spring. In this wave, significant cross-sectarian protests occurred in political systems that have been for decades organized around explicit sectarian lines and divides,²⁸ such as those in Lebanon and Iraq. Fanar et al.'s²⁹ chapter on sectarianism³⁰ disagrees with Masoud et al.'s argument that Islam is an important variable in the examination of Middle Eastern politics. Those disagreements between the authors of some of the most interesting chapters are intellectually fruitful. If there is a domain in which Middle East political science has the potential to considerably contribute to the theoretical debate, it is clearly that of identity politics.

The "Arab State" and the Emerging Trends in Middle East Political Science

While less extensively studied than the first three, the state is still an important topic of interest in Middle East political science. It is a significant factor for analysing the political economy,³¹ migration and displacement of the population,³² and local politics in the MENA region. How politics and economy interact may affect any country's development. Therefore, the well-being of the country's population is also a central question of political economy.³³ At this level, the divergent socio-economic conditions experienced by Arab countries have fed extensive interrogation. According to Eibl, Hatab, and Hertog, regarding "economic development, the MENA region appears as a place of paradox. It contains some of the world's wealthiest societies... but also among its poorest peoples, mired in conflict and corruption".³⁴ Most Middle political economists will agree that those differences can only be understood by considering the state's role in each national context or its characteristics. What explains these divergent characteristics? Traditionally, scholars have focused on structural explanations such as the differences in the impact of colonialism, institutional settings, the existence or not of rentier revenues, etc. Yet according to the authors of the chapter on political economy, today, it is hard to ignore the role of agency-related factors such as the elites' choices and group interests, crony state-business ties, policy decisions, etc.³⁵

23 Lindsay J. Benstead, Justin Gengler & Michael Robbins, "Public Opinion," in: Lynch, Schwedler & Yom (eds.), pp. 206-231.

24 Ibid., p. 209.

25 Fanar Haddad et al., "The Politics of Identity and Sectarianism," in: Lynch, Schwedler & Yom (eds.), p. 182.

26 Ibid., p. 184.

27 Ibid., p. 183.

28 Ibid., p. 182.

29 Ibid., pp. 182-205.

30 Ibid.

31 Ferdinand Eibl, Shima Hatab & Steffen Hertog, "Political Economy and Development," in: Lynch, Schwedler & Yom (eds.), pp. 132-155.

32 Rawan Arar et al., "Migration and Displacement," pp. 232-255.

33 Janine Clark et al., "Toward a Relational Approach to Local Politics," in: Lynch, Schwedler & Yom (eds.), pp. 256-280.

34 Eibl, Hatab & Hertog, "Political Economy and Development," p. 132.

35 Ibid., pp. 131-134, 143.

The state is also a key player in studying migration and displacement in the MENA region. Research on this topic has exponentially grown since 2011, with the considerable population displacement experienced in countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen resulting in the new armed conflict that engulfed several Arab countries in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. Yet, according to Rawan et al. in chapter 10, if most of those studies take "2011 as the point of departure or disjuncture for these population movements [...] few of the questions of interest to political scientists of the modern Middle East can be understood without reference to those myriad past episodes".³⁶ On the other hand, population movements in the MENA region cannot be confined to only forced displacements. The region has a long-standing history of labour migration. In the past decade, however, the issue of segregation that Syrian refugees face in host countries has garnered most of the scholarly attention. For instance, how "[s]tates have...used policies to enforce temporal and spatial segregation, such as Lebanon's municipal curfews targeting Syrians since 2012"³⁷ is a research topic that has been widely studied.

Finally, despite not being totally absent before 2011, the study of local politics in the MENA region has emerged as a new important subject of research during the last decade. Through an analytical review of the scholars on the issue, Clark et al. argue that Middle East political science should give more room for the study of the subnational politics in the Arab world as it "can enrich the scholarship on comparative politics at large".³⁸ This can be useful for discussing the differences that do exist between the Arab states at the level of institutional settings and opposition to authoritarianism and in-state socio-economic and developmental disparities, but also could produce valuable knowledge to the field of subnational political science that currently totally "ignores research on the MENA".³⁹

Main Contributions and Limitations

The Political Science of the Middle East: Theory and Research Since the Arab Uprisings is a valuable effort that assesses the state of Middle East political science following a decade of an unparalleled sequence of events that will most likely have long-lasting effects on the region. The book is a must-read for anyone interested in Middle East politics and merits recognition for at least two reasons.

First, it will become a reference work for students and teachers of Middle East political science. It is as an ideal starting point for any new student of Middle East politics, especially those in graduate schools aiming to gain a deep knowledge of the literature that dealt with the Arab uprisings but is not limited to it. The extensive literature review in it clearly depicts the current research landscape on important topics in Middle political science. It identifies the discipline's central theoretical debates and controversies and their connection to the broader field of political science. It has brought together scholars in the discipline known for their expertise in the topics covered by the book. Additionally, the book highlights potential research gaps that need to be addressed and could be developed into in-depth projects. Consequently, even experienced scholars of Middle East politics will find interest in reading the book.

While some contributors were committed to the book's comparative approach between pre-2011 and post-2011 research directions and concluded with a discussion of how latest findings on the subject may be linked to the broader debate of the field, some contributions lacked these perspectives. Therefore, they

36 Arar et al., "Migration and Displacement," p. 233.

37 Ibid., p. 240.

38 Clark et al., "Toward a Relational Approach to Local Politics," p. 258.

39 Ibid., pp. 260, 262.

missed the chance to identify how new knowledge production on the topics under scrutiny enhances the theoretical debate outside the scope of the region.

Second, the book's efforts to be inclusive is noteworthy and deserving of recognition. Notably, the initiative to bring together Middle East Politics experts from both Western and Middle Eastern backgrounds (despite most of the latter working in Western universities) must be applauded. This is quite important for the Middle East political science that has been historically seen in the region as a "folk of Yankees" with a superficial knowledge of the region and inadequate Arabic language skills. For some, they were a group of well-intentioned idealists. For others, they have an "imperialist" agenda in service of US foreign policy. If the Middle East political science research community has struggled for decades to earn recognition in US academia, however, I firmly believe that gaining recognition within Arab academia is equally essential.

It is, therefore, imperative to promote collaborations with Arab political scientists who may not have published in English. The significance of perspectives and analyses developed outside of Western academia should not be overlooked. So, it is regrettable that not one of the volume editors is an Arab scholar based in an Arab institution. It would have been a sign that Arab scholars based in the Arab region are accepted as capable theoreticians and not merely data collectors. More importantly, that would help overcome the impression that it is a book mainly targeting Western academia, or more particularly US academia, in other words, a book edited by US scholars for US students and teachers. Any well-intentioned inclusive approach cannot fulfil its potential without considering the scholarship in Arabic. Despite the significant contributions made by Arab political scientists in comprehending, conceptualizing, and examining the post-2011 political event in the region, the book did not acknowledge them.

References

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