

THE FAR-REACHING IMPACTS OF THE ARAB SPRING

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A Review of *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*
By Marc Lynch
(New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 288 pages.


Embedded in its very title, Marc Lynch's *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* delves into a question that has been left unanswered by commentators and critics alike: Was the Arab uprising one underlying movement organized under a grandiose ideal to give birth to a new Middle East, or was it a multitude of popular and unfinished revolutions that unfolded in different locations in sequential timing? Lynch's answer is that it was both: The Arab uprising was a continuous oscillation between the transnational and the local. Such a reading is not, in itself, new. Pan-Africanism, an example of a postcolonial vision that emerged in the wake of the independences of the 1960s, acted as a double bind between a return to local identities (yet against tribalism) and a hope for political collectivity (a new regionalism with root differences).¹ Incidentally, the sixties were another cornerstone era for the Middle East—if only for Egypt, strategically situated at the crossroads of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula—and Lynch's book offers the possibility to observe a move, both historical and geographical, from Pan-Africanism to Pan-Arabism.

We cannot understand what has been called the “Arab Spring” without a grasp of the past thirty years in the region, an uncompromising rooting in present national events, and a firm perception of international pressures from humanitarian interventions and American interests.² This is the geopolitical agenda Lynch sets forth to analyze.³ Looking at the past to envision different alternatives for the future, he provides a list of historical protests intertwined with today's challenges. To understand the latter, he asks that we position ourselves within the transformation of what he terms the “Arab public sphere.” This expression is not without problems of its own, such as who composes it and how it is represented. But if we follow Lynch through the hypothesis of the emergence of a new “Arab public sphere,” then an alternative to rethink the Arab Spring as an early manifestation of a deeper, longer, and slower transformation comes forth. Put simply, it asks how to transform the political passion of the Arab Spring into more permanent political structures.⁴

Media and technology, from *Al Jazeera* to Twitter, have often been cited as instrumental in the uprisings. Few have placed the use of modern media and tech-

nology into a single coherent narrative as Lynch does, where media and technology supplement, rather than provoke, underlying political struggles. If media and technology were instrumental, it is in terms of persuasion: showing the possibility for success down the road.⁵ Lynch asks his readers to recall Gamal Abdel Nasser's strategic use of the radio before and during the Suez Canal crisis.

Finally, *The Arab Uprising* asks readers to reconsider the determination of "success" or "failure" of recent revolutions.⁶ To define the outcome with a fixed, one-word answer seems not only reductive, but also misleading. What follows independence or autonomy is not only liberty, but also responsibility: lasting structures that allow for democratic judgment to operate, not only on election day. In Lynch's analysis, here lies the American president Barack Obama's administration's strongest opportunity for development: an undoing of the "axis of evil" rhetoric and an erasing of the "you're either with us or against us" narrative.⁷ In my view, such an analysis offers a rethinking of how U.S. foreign policy should focus on engaging with structural transformations taking hold in a new generation, using long-term ideals and fast-paced information technology, to give a new interpretation to a pan-Arab movement from below. This may be a new Middle East that further acknowledges local particularities and differences while simultaneously acting in accordance with regional focal points, most notably, but not limited to, the Palestine issue.

In this new picture, what might the roles of Qatar and Turkey be? How might a Pan-Arab collectivity reshape the influence of Saudi Arabia or Iran? And perhaps most importantly, will a serious rethinking of America's relationship with Israel accompany the acknowledgement of a new balance of power? While *The Arab Uprising* does not claim to do prospective work, Lynch does offer a few leads to begin answering these conundrums. Perhaps the book's strongest claim is that there is always the possibility of change, even amid uncertainties and under what seem to be the most hopeless conditions. For future U.S. foreign policymakers, *The Arab Uprising* offers a lesson on why they should accept the limits of their influence in the new geography to come, and what they should focus on instead. 

NOTES

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital," review of *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, by Vivek Chibber, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 27, no. 1 (March 2014), 184–198.

² For an account of a geopolitical agenda laid in "humanitarian" interventions, see Vijay Prashad, *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2012).

³ Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 27.

⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selected Prison Notebooks*, tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 139.

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⁵ Lynch, 102.

⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁷ Referred to as “the axis of evil” by John Lewis Gaddis, “A Grand Strategy of Transformation,” in *Foreign Policy*, No. 133 (Nov. – Dec., 2002), pp. 50–57. See also: Debra Merskin, “The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-September 11 Discourse of George W. Bush,” in *Mass Communication and Society*, 7, no. 2, 2004, pp. 157–175.