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Review

The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Peril of the Arab Revolution

Marwan Bishara. New York: Nation Books, 2012. 258 pp.

Daniel G. Acheson-Brown*

Marwan Bishara's *The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Peril of the Arab Revolution* (2012) is a must-read for students and scholars of the Middle East and the Arab world. The author is a senior political analyst for Al Jazeera English channel, and is also editor of Al Jazeera's show "Empire." Bishara spent many hours doing first-hand reporting from the streets of the Arab uprisings of 2011. He presents an intense book, organized in an essay format, with relevant topical sections.

According to Bishara, U.S. involvement in the region has increased greatly since the September 11 attacks; I would choose an earlier date—the 1991 Gulf War. The American role in the region is based on energy security—a systemic-structural reality that cannot be ignored. This has been the case since World War II. Thus, U.S. and European policy-makers, rather than being driven by malevolent intent, are instead trapped by their

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energy needs. President Carter recognized this trap and warned Americans to seek a way out of Middle East energy dependence, but he was ignored. So, Bishara is correct when he says the West places “interests,” over “values.” Because of these interests, the U.S. often pays attention to Arabs who are terrorists, dictators, and/or oil providers, ignoring what Bishara calls the “invisible Arabs”—the vast populace who are none of these.

But U.S. interests or values became moot during the Arab Spring—the “invisible” Arabs had taken to the streets and were not waiting for direction from Western policy-makers. Bishara is quite correct to place great emphasis on the generational aspects of the Arab Spring. Since 1929, the long established Muslim Brotherhood has shunned revolution as a method of change, preferring to work within existing governmental systems. Therefore, at first older members of the Muslim Brotherhood lagged behind the young, well-educated, media savvy, economically straightjacketed democratic populace, who showed up in solidarity with their peers across the Arab world. “Young” does not necessarily refer to chronological age, for Nawal Sadawi and many other “young-thinking” elders were involved directly in the protests and uprisings. Rather, “young” symbolizes the effort to create a re-birth of Arab societies. Bishara makes this point, but he does not give sufficient weight to the Muslim Brotherhood agenda of exclusion.

The book does an excellent job of highlighting the many civic organizations involved in the movement, for example soccer teams, student organizations, and cyber-communities. Heroes such as Ali Bouazizi (Tunisia), Khaled Said (Egypt), and Tawakkol Karman (Yemen) are cited, correctly, as important mobilizers of revolt. But Bishara is careful to point out that resistance to the repressive regimes had been long in the making. The pressure cooker of Arab societies under extreme deprivation and repression had been building up steam for years.

Bishara explains that between 1998 and 2004 there were over 1,000 collective worker actions in Egypt. In April 2006, 20,000 workers went on strike in the textile center of Mahallah; in December 2006 and again in September 2007, civil servants and white-collar workers joined in. Economic deprivation, political repression, crony corruption, and state-terrorism by “security” forces were at the heart of the problem. These things caused, and continue to cause, the revolts against the existing regimes. Earlier cyber-communicators such as Kareem el-Beheiry, Mahallah’s strike blogger and video recorder, are also given their due by Bishara.

While at times Bishara warns that this will be a long journey, he mixes that cautionary tone with a more triumphal one that heralds the revolution that he says has already occurred. But he is a bit too innocent in his belief that Sharia law can comfortably coexist with other legal systems. Which system would give way when the laws inevitably conflict? Where is the democratic structure that would allow for a true consultation of the people?

In places this book recognizes the danger that the “change movement,” as I call it, could easily be hijacked: either by various residual forces of the old regimes, or by extremist Islamists. Because of this, I would suggest we not yet use the term “revolution,” as Bishara does, to describe the revolts, demonstrations, protests, and even regime overturns. A revolution is a longer process, not a season. To call something a revolution implies that it is completed, something has revolved, and something new has taken its place. Specifically, the governance of society has changed, not just the names of the actors. In a *democratic* revolution, institutions have to change, becoming responsive, accountable, and representative of the people. Critically important is that minorities are protected by law (*de jure*) and in fact (*de facto*). This means protection of minority opinions, free speech, and minority cultural behaviors.

My concern is that the truly democratic elements have been largely outgunned and out-organized, and ultimately sidelined. Months after the Arab Spring, the progressive, pluralistic youth groups of April 6th and the tolerant religious factions are being marginalized again by the military and by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Bishara, too, raises this concern in his epilogue, but he remains essentially optimistic that “this can’t and won’t last long” (218). He asserts that “a revolutionary social transformation has taken place.” But for four-fifths of Arab youth (both male and female), a real revolutionary social transformation has not taken place at all. Instead, the other fifth is dominating and managing the change process, giving only lip-service to democracy, while consolidating its own power.

Recently in Libya (11 September 2012), U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and members of his staff were murdered in what was no doubt an organized, well-armed, premeditated attack. To be this well-armed and organized, the attackers would have had to plan their assault *before* the furor erupted over the anti-Mohammed video—they used this opportunity to infiltrate the protests. Most Libyans are struggling to remake Libya in the post-Gadhafi era and to see the U.S. in a favorable, if qualified, light. However,

clearly a determined few (perhaps with foreign involvement) want to derail Libyan ties with the West. Extremists may not be large in number but they seek to manipulate policies through strategic and tactical uses of shocking violence. It is also worth stressing that they will primarily attack the moderates to maneuver themselves into power. While the situations are different in Libya and in Egypt, Libya having basically a weak government and Egypt a strong one, the potential of the nonprogressive forces to do harm is great in both countries.

Despite what appears already to be an over-optimistic prognosis, the book does an excellent job of documenting the efforts at change, and suggesting how change might ultimately occur, in the Arab world. I have adopted it for my Middle East Politics course, and it serves students superbly.