Review Essay

Dispatches From the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East, Eds. Paul Amar and Vijay Prashad (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013)

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More than four years after the so-called “Arab Spring” began, headlines across most of the Middle East seem depressingly retro. The United States is fighting Sunni extremists in Iraq. Activists imprisoned for peacefully protesting a repressive government in Egypt are on hunger strike. Gazans are digging out from the most recent Israeli bombardment. People from Morocco to Oman face poor job prospects and rising living costs. In 2011, people in the region argued over which dictator would be the next to fall. Today, activists breathe a sigh of relief when colleagues are released from prison on bail, even if they still face farcical trials. The sole bright spot is Tunisia, where despite set-backs, a genuine political (if not yet social) transition continues.

Both because of the depressing nature of current events and the ease with which they overwhelm, Dispatches from the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East offers a head-clearing experience. Reading it is a bit like looking at a wedding album amidst divorce proceedings. It’s a reminder of

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2 Paul Amar and Vijay Prashad (eds.), Dispatches from the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
the sense of possibility and optimism that pervaded everything not very long ago—seen all the more bittersweetly given the knowledge of what has followed.

The book’s editors remain committed to describing the smiling couple and explaining just how much they loved one another. If Dispatches has an overriding argument or message, it is that the real revolution in the Middle East has been a revolution in consciousness. Contributors argue cogently that the uprisings changed the way people think, the way they organize, the political possibilities that they envision for themselves and their communities, and their willingness to challenge structures of oppression and injustice. The sacrifices made by those who brought about those heady revolutions were not in vain. Their goals were worthy. And—it is implied—their altered consciousness will ultimately determine the fate of the new Middle East.

This view of the uprisings is anchored in narratives of long-term decay, injustice, and struggle in discrete nation-states that led, in different configurations, to just and justified revolts. The focus on national-level dispatches from the uprisings reflects the book’s broader narrative. Its editors explain that “the essays are written in national terms because we are of the view that the nation remains a fundamental container for the aspirations of the many, who seek justice in their constitutions and in their legacies of national unity.”3 The essays do indeed make clear that national-level aspirations and frameworks for justice and equality have been central to the Arab uprisings, and the volume’s great strength is in telling national stories of repression, grievance, forbearance, and rebellion with nuance.

Broadly, the comparative approach of the book is helpful and thought-provoking. There are some drawbacks to this approach, however. First, it does not allow space for the authors to explore some of the most consequential outcomes of the Arab Spring that will determine the prospects for future mobilization of the new revolutionary consciousness. There could, for example, have been more serious examination of international and sub-national issues that in turn affect national trajectories. The capture of political opportunities by Islamist, salafi, and jihadi groups that has in turn spurred renewed repression across the region could also have been explored further. Second, by focusing on providing explanations for how national-level aspirations were articulated and pursued, the book skirts an important question: what happens when national-level narratives are called into question? What do fractured national identities and competing aspirations in national contexts mean for the “new Middle East”?

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3 Ibid, xii.