

STUDENT BOOK REVIEW:

Democratic Uprisings in the New Middle East: Youth, Technology, Human Rights, and US Foreign Policy

Mahmood Monshipouri

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Mahmood Monshipouri's *Democratic Uprisings in the New Middle East* addresses an intersection of topics not often considered together in traditional international studies literature: youth, social media, human rights, and the U.S. response to the revolutions in the Middle East. His book accomplishes this by packing a broad discussion into a short treatise to provide college students or the general reader with an overview of recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa ("MENA"). He introduces the reader to a holistic picture of relationships between the region's youth, the rise of social media, amplified demand for human rights, and the resultant options for U.S. foreign policy. Monshipouri speaks to the uprisings of the Arab Spring in 2011, where youth across MENA played a critical role in organizing a spontaneous region-wide movement calling for their respective governments to change leadership. He also recalls Iran's Green Movement, a similar campaign waged largely by Iranian youth in 2009. He suggests the Green Movement's influence on the Arab Spring to explain how the U.S. must consider the effects of major players in the region on one another to systematically address MENA's evolving geopolitics.

Monshipouri begins Chapter 1 by arguing that while social media has empowered MENA youth, it is a proximate rather than underlying cause for the uprisings, which still required well-organized grassroots participation. He emphasizes the constraints of social media: like protests, new media is better able to tear down a regime than construct a new system. Further, governments can themselves leverage the technology just as well to repress rights and expression. Monshipouri urges the avoidance of technological determinism, a belief that technology itself will drive societal changes.¹ He next elucidates in Chapter 2 how the Arab Spring arose more directly from several widely acknowledged underlying factors: stagnant economies, failed educational systems, repressed human rights, and the region's youth bulge.²

¹ MAHMOOD MONSHIPOURI, *DEMOCRATIC UPRISINGS IN THE NEW MIDDLE EAST: YOUTH, TECHNOLOGY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND US FOREIGN POLICY* ch. 1 (2013).

² *Id.* at ch. 2.

In Chapter 3, Monshipouri claims that social media will boost human rights in unprecedented ways because it has exposed youth to these ideals, empowering them with a greater sense of choice, as seen in the revolutions. However, Monshipouri provides little empirical or anecdotal evidence to support this conclusion, granted that such proof would be difficult to acquire. He hesitates to predict whether the uprisings will eventually result in consolidated democracies, but he believes that social media will prevent regimes from continuing the status quo and will enable MENA citizens to have a dialogue about contemporary Islam: How can an Islamic democracy exist, or can it? What role can and should women play in shaping society? How will youth reconcile the values of faith and freedom of expression as they grow into the next generation of civic leaders?³ Similarly, in Chapter 4, Monshipouri details how social media facilitated the formation of MENA youth identity, with protestors relating to the Arab Spring through different lenses such as political philosophies, religion, gender, and hip-hop.⁴

A brief history of U.S.-Iran relations in Chapter 5 attempts to illustrate how a link between the Green Movement and the Arab Spring could affect the U.S., because its foreign policy must consider the geopolitical effects of Iran on its neighbors and vice versa in order to protect American interests in the region. Yet the argument falls short in explaining how the Green Movement helped to foment the Arab Spring, relying on assertions by scholars and Iranian leaders along with a facial comparison of the uprisings without primary testimony from those directly involved in the uprisings to support his claims or secondary analysis of online patterns that could have better demonstrated such a link.⁵ In Chapter 6, Monshipouri describes how these grassroots movements exposed flaws in the U.S.'s confused foreign policy towards the region following the September 11 attacks. Indeed, the U.S.'s military engagement and aid in the region, in an effort to combat terrorism, has resulted in negative views of the U.S. among citizens across the Middle East. As Monshipouri describes, the U.S. needs a shift in strategy if it is to balance MENA public opinion about the U.S. with what the U.S. sees as its national security needs. Monshipouri reviews the recent history of U.S. engagement with MENA and clearly lays out several of the major implications of the Arab Spring: inspiring solidarity in the region, possibly consolidating democracy with a respect for human rights across states, forcing a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian

³ *Id.* at ch. 3.

⁴ *Id.* at ch. 4.

⁵ *Id.* at ch. 5.

conflict, questioning what he deems the U.S.'s neoliberal economic agenda, and increasing the role of the military in Egypt, at least in the short-term. Recognizing the U.S.'s waning influence in the region, he goes on to explore the most fruitful options for U.S. foreign policy in MENA: allying with Turkey, pragmatically engaging armed non-state actors, and shifting economic assistance to an arguably neutral promotion of economic growth. Finally, Monshipouri suggests that the Arab Spring increased demand not just for bread but for dignity – an implication, perhaps, that the U.S. should keep central in its revised approach to the region.⁶

Though Monshipouri simplifies his explanation for the intended novice reader, his arguments could benefit from a more nuanced perspective. For instance, he might have provided a rationale for which countries he includes in MENA, or clarified which human rights he believes protestors demanded. Further, he often refers to the region as a whole, which sometimes results in generalizations rather than a careful consideration of the differences among MENA countries. The book could also profit from analysis of the effect of Al-Jazeera, the ways MENA citizens use respective social media platforms differently, and the historical precedents for revolt in the region. Further, Monshipouri claims that social media lets youth rewrite the Orientalist narrative of a region seething with Islamists and terrorists, but he does not address how such groups might also use social media to organize or write their narrative, thus setting aside a critical facet of the U.S.'s ongoing strategic calculations. Ultimately, Monshipouri asks more questions than he can answer in the space, but succeeds in offering an accessible summary of a key issue impacting human rights and U.S. foreign policy today.

⁶ *Id.* at ch. 6.