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** The surnames are listed in alphabetical order.*

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BOOK REVIEW

Noah Feldman

The Arab Winter: A Tragedy

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020, ISBN: 9780691194929, 216 pp., \$22.95 hb.)

After the fall of Tunisia and the regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the so-called “Arab Spring” reached Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria. The regimes of Ben Ali, Gaddafi, and the regimes of Hosni Mubarak and Ali Abdullah Saleh fell, while the Syrian revolution turned into a multilateral war. At the same time, the name of the Arab spring raises controversy due to the violence that accompanied the revolutions and their disappointing results.

In “The Arab Winter,” Noam Feldman emphasized that the Arab Spring in the Middle East fell short of achieving the majority of its higher aspirations. The Arab spring, unfortunately, deteriorated many people’s lives and turned into a tragedy called “Winter.” The author aims to provide intellectual readers, decision-makers, and researchers with an in-depth political interpretation and analysis of the Arab spring and its outcomes.

The main three outcomes that shaped the current phase in the Middle East are the new political experience, Arab nationalism, and political Islam. Collective action was newly introduced into the region, which shaped the people acting on “their own.” The massive spillover of the Arab spring did not hide the reality that Arab nationalism has been fragmented. Dealing with the protests and people separately by the authorities led to the closing of borders, among other factors, motivating the appearance of identity issues. As a result, the Arab spring fed the divisions in some countries like Syria, Libya, Yemen,

and Egypt, but with a different means of control by categorizing the population. Feldman also observed that political Islam had been fundamentally transformed after the events. The collapse of brotherhood governments and movements is an end to democratically oriented political Islam as it used to be.

To analyze and discuss the three outcomes mentioned above, “The Arab Winter” examines different pivotal events of the Arab Spring: Egypt’s revolt and military takeover, Syria’s civil war, the Islamic State’s “ISIS caliphate,” and Tunisian difficulties in the process of democracy. After demonstrating the regional commonalities and differences in protesters’ demands, Feldman highlighted the states’ experiences and introduced them as separate cases to show a specific outcome. For instance, Tunisia represents liberal political Islam while Egypt shows the institutional one. However, after the rise of ISIS, Syria has become “a rejectionist form of political Islam.”

Feldman argued that the Arab spring’s heroic story had been transformed into uncertainty and something darker. “The Arab Spring promised to end dictatorship and bring self-government to people across the Middle East.” Except in Tunisia, the revolution that started with so much hope has turned into a dictatorship, civil war, extremism, or all three.

On the other hand, Feldman contends that the Arab Spring was not a complete failure or even destiny. A brave and painful sequence of

events took place in the Middle East for the first time in modern history when Arab people started working together to pursue freedom. Moreover, Noam claimed that the decision to change governments and regimes in the Middle East this time came from within. It is no secret that the conditions influencing politics, the economy, and other institutional affairs historically were shaped by colonialism and superpowers. Therefore, the history of the region used to be shaped by outsiders, according to the author.

Feldman wanted to be optimistic about the Arab spring, so he believed that even though these events did not result in constitutional democracy or even a more comfortable life for the majority of those affected, this did not mean that the effort had been useless. However, the political activities that took place in the Middle East during the Arab spring had and still have a considerable impact. He also believes that “failure is always a possible outcome of attempting self-determination” and that such efforts may be significant in the future.

Evaluating the Arab spring cannot be done without referring to the characteristics and demands of the people themselves during the period of so-called “revolution.” An immediate investigation can show that people’s lives became worse than before after what happened. Therefore, if democracy and freedom lead to well-being, this is not the case in the Middle East so far, especially in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, where people are still suffering today or worse than before.

However, seven years was not enough time to judge an experience based on the shadow of change after a long period of colonialism and dictatorship in the region. The changes are not visible when we target the political leadership and ignore the deep state. For instance, Feldman did not focus on the deep state’s role in the Middle East and how this state still controls the political scene. What happened in the Arab spring countries cannot be well explained and comprehended in terms of the deep state’s transformation and

movement. Therefore, the outcomes of the Arab spring are not direct results of the people’s protests and demands, as, in fact, it is a political will and a continuity of the deep state when the dictators are just interfaced actors.

The same thing goes for the evaluation of political Islam and Arab nationalism. Arab nationalism has had critical issues and controversies for a long time in the region, even before the Arab spring. Therefore, the rise of politics based on Islamic views itself was an answer to the failure of Arab nationalism. On the other hand, so-called political Islam has continuously fed from the religiosity of societies and is not the same in all countries. As a result, it cannot be ended as society is a power source for this type of politics. Also, Feldman depended a lot on the facts shown and introduced by the media. However, what the media portrays always depends on and serves different agendas and ideological points of view.

Feldman’s analyses also ignore the fact that many outsiders interfered and assisted in turning the balance of power in one direction, mostly against people’s will. For instance, the Syrian regime called on Russia and Iran to help control the Syrian people, but it ended with a massive war and casualties.

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