

## Arab Spring in Syria and the Rest

the rest:  
journal of politics and development  
2022 | vol 12(2) | 163-170  
[www.therestjournal.com](http://www.therestjournal.com)

### I. William Zartman, PhD

\* Jacob Blaustein Distinguished Professor Emeritus. The Johns Hopkins University-SAIS; former President, Middle East Studies Association

**Itimar Rabinovich & Carmit Valensi**, *Syrian Requiem: The Civil War and its Aftermath*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021, ISBN: 9780691193311, 288 pp., £25.00 / \$29.95)

**Noah Feldman**, *The Arab Winter: A Tragedy*, (Princeton: Princeton Press University, 2021, ISBN: 9780691194929, 216 pp., \$22.95 / £18.99)

It's a sad day for scholarly judgments on Middle East events, particularly Arab seasons. Analyses are back again to conclude that irresponsible autocracy is the synonym for Arab governance after acting as bearish and bullish as the current stock market. Decades of evidence-based research came to the repeated conclusion that "democracy" couldn't be spelt in Arabic, and even Islamic attempts at governing were vulnerable to secular autocrats. A number of accounts have pointed out how clayey the giants' feet were, but all concluded that they were encased in the heavy military boots. When in fact, counter-indications broke the surface and toppled the giants right and left, we all admitted how wrong we were and wondered why. But then things rapidly returned to normal, and a decade later, not one Arab Spring government remained.

It is sad indeed because, as democrats ourselves and basic optimists, scholars and the watching world rose to cheer the young people and then the middle class that rose against the autocrats, sharing the hope that The People would finally have their say and could not be repressed forever. We even hoped that our Western democracies would come to support the popular liberation movements so that interests and values could coincide in support of new Arab democracies. It all crashed. What went wrong, how wrong did it go, and why?

Two scholarly authorities with practical experience face these questions, one addressing several cases in the whole area and the other taking on a single case. Noah Feldman seeks to make sense of the events beyond the individual states' scorecard and does an admirable job, for I, too, believe that the Spring was remarkable and significant (Zartman, 2015). His argument is that The People took charge of events, producing profound consequences for the region. If one can take issue with the development of his argument, it is not because the argument is thin and weak but because it is thick and conceptually based, inviting an encounter with some of its concepts and their application. This is no simple account of historical agency but a personal grappling with the political agency running through events.

The most notable aspect was that The People acted, where the habit of events past was that they were only acted upon. That was the reason for the widespread cheering from the outside world, and

it is certain to have lasting effects beyond the immediate repressive action of governments in Syria, Egypt, Algeria and even Tunisia. The universal cry of “freedom, dignity, jobs, bread, justice” did not include “democracy”, only the outputs of a properly functioning political system, but they cannot be trashed by the street sweepers. People acting, Feldman discusses later, means intentional acting or agency to determine the outcome of political events, and it can be broken down into historical actions that can be observed and dated and political agency that can be felt in trends of events (pp. 30-34).

The second notable and perhaps more debatable consequence has been the dissolution of pan-Arab nationalism. To point out The People acted is also, as Feldman emphasizes, to indicate that external actors played a minor role, whereas Middle East history to this point involved significant and determinate action from without. Although the initial Spring was an impressive example of an imitation effect across the Arab—and only Arab—world, it brought out separate national political patterns and identities and also the ethnic mixture that each state contained. While undeniable, this is an analyst’s effect, neither absent in the past nor assured for the future.

The third effect has been the demonstrated inability of political Islam to exercise governing power effectively. Its attempts to seize power out of the rubble of the state produced by the uprising showed its own ineptitude. Ennahda and the Brotherhood were striking examples of national failure in Tunisia and Egypt for different reasons, but the Islamic State that tried to drag the *intifada* back into the dark--not Golden--ages has brutally failed at governing for the whole Muslim world.

The theme of People’s action also carries the exclusion of two frequently evoked mantras that Feldman points out after the initial presentation. First, the notion that the army is The People, either acting as a legitimizing control over the regime or as an extension of The People from whom its troops came (a point not developed) is simply factually inaccurate. Second, the notion that an authoritarian regime rests on a social (political?) contract of “bread for silence” is analytically false; the regime assumed the relation (or at least its second element), but it was their principle, never a contract, and the absence of the first part frequently placed it in the slogans of the *intifada*.

On the basis of these ideas, Feldman turns to his cases with a careful analysis based on research and reasoning and firsthand experience in the countries of the Spring. He begins with Egypt, where he seems to have trouble with his argument. Undeniably, The People acted in Midan al-Tahrir. It may be true that the army was the one that told Hosni Mubarak to resign, against the advice of the US, for example, but he only had to look at the window to see the real force behind that message. The army, too, saw that force and had its own reasons for job protection to back The People’s message. It seems clear, as Feldman notes that neither The People nor the army had any notion of what should happen next except those elections were needed. When Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was the result of poor electoral participation, two unexpected events followed: his adoption of a winner-takes-all spoils system and his appointment of Gen. Abdelfatah al-Sisi as army head. The two institutional forces, the Brotherhood and the Army, played a game of political seesaw for two years until, fearing that Morsi was gaining the upper position, it sacked him. This action, Feldman claims, was also a case of The People acting, but for all his careful argument, that seems a shaky judgment to hold. True, there was another huge round of demonstrations, but did The People act “in ways that determine the outcome” (p 31)? “Egypt faces a revolutionary process that interacts and mingles with a process of reform, and both are surrounded by military coup...based on street support of some segments of society facing a strong spreading and continuous process of opposition.” (El Raggal and Ezzat, 2015). Out of this jumble of agency, Feldman concludes (or posits) that the “people acted as agents of their own political future by overthrowing the [Morsi] regime...[and] effectively inviting the return of the very [military] regime they had overthrown two and a half years before.” (p. 31). One can also conclude

that the People were so engrossed in their new practice of protest that they never noticed, as the Army was the one that acted.

Curiously, Feldman turns to Tunisia at the end, where most commentators put it at the beginning as a model. Its story seems straightforward as an example of The People's agency, a comparative model for the rest as well as the initiator of the Spring wave. Feldman notes this with a detailed appreciation of the ways in which The People acted. Many aspects made Tunisia an unexceptional Arab state, historically its own nation, but it produced an exceptional experience. Tunisia did have a strong civil society, and its version of the Muslim Brotherhood—the Ennahda movement, then party--was led by an experienced intellectual, Rachid Ghannouchi, who pressed his party into accepting a coalition—all the opposite of Morsi.

The *intifada* (uprising) itself was a remarkable and spontaneous rolling coalition of unemployed, labor (not unions initially), middle class and party leaders with no plans except the removal of the regime and a list of grievances. Two figures dominated the crowd: Ghannouchi and an aged leftover from the early independence regime, Beji Qaid Essebsi, a secular leader who insisted that the uprising was against the autocratic regime, not against the state. When the adamantly secular and moderately religious forces deadlocked over the writing of a constitution in 2014, the civil society stepped in the form of a Quartet of professional organizations. A model compromise constitution was passed, but the undercurrent of political agency that pitted religious against secular directions gradually tore the system—and the two leaders—into vicious infighting of position politics to the neglect of the original slogan of the needs that caused the uprising.

Feldman's analysis is shown by events that closed the story after his book was published to be more accurate than he could claim (Mohsen-Finan, 2021). The acting People “went to the streets seeking jobs and social justice.... What they got was constitutional democracy with elected politicians. Yet liberal democracy does not have any magic solution for facilitating economic development...[but] remains vulnerable to future threats and challenges...based on the regime's failure to resolve deep-seated economic and social problems” (p. 131-132). In 2021, as in the previous decade, a *deus ex machina* stepped in, not as a responsible coalition of civil society to break the irresponsible deadlock, but instead a presidential coup by newly elected Kais es-Saied, a civilian version of as-Sisi (with army backing) who removed the institutions of democracy but had no plans for development himself. Feldman foresaw the trend, although he is overly laudatory of a Tunisian sense of political responsibility.

The People acted in a series of elections since the uprising, and they elected es-Saied, a newcomer professor with a populist message but they were soon alienated by what they got as the parliament, which they also elected, was suspended (and some members arrested) and replaced by government by executive fiat. Feldman's analysis of the historical actions up to this point is insightful and prescient, but should periodic elections be also counted as a political agency? That would seem to routinize the concept out of significance. In any case, in Tunisia, as in Egypt, The People's agency has become a thing of the past, making for an Arab Winter.

Feldman then turns to Syria, certainly the nadir of the Arab Winter and The People's agency. In Syria, The People acted too, as in Egypt and Tunisia, but Syria is a different country. Whereas the other two nations were rather homogeneous and geographically contiguous internally, the Syrian nation is ethnically heterogeneous, geographically scattered and religiously riven, and the course of the People's action reflected these divisions. Initially an amorphous mass as in the other two countries, it soon fell apart as rival organizations seized upon the disparities to find a source for their followers and their troops. Tunisia and Egypt never reached the organization stage but remained as socio-political rhizomes, connected by social media and essentially leaderless; the Syrian uprising sought organization, formed armies, and produced a number of competing leaders.

The People was cut into pieces by its composition in Syria, but the regime capitalized on the situation. The regime could not have played on the fragmentation of the Tunisian or Egyptian people because there was none of significance, but in Syria, the regime was a religious minority selling protection to other minorities and marginalization to other regions. The army abandoned the regime in the other two countries, but it immediately entered into the conflict in Syria, backing the regime viciously. It was the military response that turned the *intifada* into a civil war.

A third characteristic that distinguished Syria from the other two uprisings, after The People's heterogeneity and the regime's military response, was foreign involvement. Feldman, who has written a good deal about American foreign policy, reaches back to the US invasion of Iraq to begin his causal trail. Once again, he focuses on political agency—he drops the theme's name in favour of the moral question—rather than a blow-by-blow account of complex events since 2003. In introducing instability on the back of democracy in Iraq, the invasion released a number of forces in the region and a corresponding instability in US policy in the region. When the uprising occurred, the US sympathized, and Secretary Hilary Clinton fostered the only national Syrian resistance organization—albeit on paper—that existed (which Feldman omits but Rabinovich and Valensi pick up). But when Clinton and other ranking figures urged President Barak Obama to offer direct support to the resistance, and when Obama drew a clear red line against Asad's use of chemical weapons, he pulled back to the paper on that one too, and Asad continued his use of sodium and other chemicals. “US policy was to strengthen the forces threatening the regime enough to keep them in the fight while refusing to take definite steps that would make them win.” (p. 90).

Russia had no such inhibitions in its support for Asad, which Feldman barely mentions alongside his ample, if warranted, castigation of the US. Russia entered early, politically in 2012 and then in 2015 with airplanes, and then with troops, and it saved Asad from a mutually hurting stalemate and a chance at negotiation, if not collapse (was it in Asad's nature to do so). Again, the invasion against The People's action separated Syria from Tunisia's and Egypt's experience, and it was the mirror image of Libya's experience, where Western countries intervened by air in the overthrow of the regime of Moammar Qadhafi. Elsewhere in the Arab Spring, Feldman's condition holds strongly, in that the people acted on their own but in Syria, Russia's direct involvement, the forerunner of its interventions along its borders, saved Asad from The People he claimed to defend (while massacring). While there is no guarantee—and perhaps even an assurance of the opposite—that any replacement of Asad by the resistance would have produced a government that could overcome The People's heterogeneity positively, it was Russia's decisive action rather than America's piddling inaction that exacerbated Syria's civil war. Whether that war is over, as Feldman intimates (p. 98), the People are back under the cruel mallet of Asad and Russia is behind the throne.

The fourth characteristic of the Syrian uprising is the very different role of political Islam, to which Feldman devotes a separate chapter. For all their mistakes in the arena of parliamentary democracy, Ennahda and the Brotherhood were non-violent political players in a competitive electoral and legislative scene; Ennahda goes by the label of moderate Islam dedicated to coalition politics (despite its banning), reaffirmed in a number of crucial meetings under Ghannouchi, and the Brotherhood, although falling to a more radical wing in a meeting in 2008, was a seasoned election and legislative player (despite its banning). The Islamic State, originally limited to Iraq and the Levant (ISIS or *da'esh*), was a non-democratic revolutionary-reformist utopian community based on a Sunni Salafi-jihadi doctrine (why Feldman adds the “-reformist” I don't know when “revolutionary” takes it all in); I would add “violent” for emphasis although that too should be understood under “revolutionary.” As indicated, it is specifically outside the parameters of the other state's experience: it did not represent action by The People but by a dedicated subversive core group, and it was and is still a transnational movement, although operating within geographic

sections, as its original name indicated. IS was formed by Sunni refugees from Iraq when the Shi'a government took over as a result of the American-imposed democratization, and it found fertile ground in the vacuum created by the Syrian civil war (and by the Iraqi government). As a result, it is brought into relief by two other analytical parameters. It was the result of international intervention and was eradicated territorially as a state also by the international intervention (although it remains as a transnational subversive movement). And it was the ultimate attempt by political Islam to create a state of its own, untrammelled by Western democratic ideas and by modern Muslim interpretations, and, at the end, abandoned by the God on whose behalf it claimed to act.

It is in Syria that Feldman meets Rabinovich and Valensi, handling the same challenge of combining historical agency or narrative and political agency or themes and mentalities. This the authors do by opening with a pre-*intifada* background and an uprising and civil war account rather than with a statement of analytical concepts, followed by chapters analysing the domestic, regional and international scene. The first chapters are a historian's history, reporting the course of events that led to an ever-inward-centre evolution of the regime from Hafiz al-Asad to his son Bashar in 2000, whose "family ran Syria as a family business" and whose entrenched and corrupt elite was constantly checked for loyalty. When the uprising occurred (sparked by government torture of some kids, not self-immolation as in Tunisia or a commemoration protest in Egypt), the regime responded with brutality; subsequent token measures of loosening were overshadowed by military harshness. As the protests spread, they avoided the two largest cities but picked up in other towns and villages, where Local Coordinating Committees provide some organization—but remained uncoordinated nationally—and later took up local governance.

Across the country, the uprising began to take on its notable characteristics of militarization, sectarianization, Islamization, regionalization and internationalization. After a year and a half of uprising, the UN declared the *intifada* a civil war in mid-2012. Hezbollah out of Lebanon captured the key city of Qusayr from the Syrian resistance less than a year later and toward the end of 2013, *da'esh* had its first military success and went on the capture Raqqah in eastern Syria and declare itself the *khalifa*, a territorial state. The same year, Obama pulled back from his redline on military involvement, hiding behind Asad's joining the Chemical Weapons Ban, with his sodium fingers crossed behind his back, and thus "paved the way for Russian military intervention." (p. 91). In 2017, along with Iran and Turkey, Russia sidelined the UN mediators' Geneva-centred efforts to bring the civil war under control by launching a competing process from Astana that made paper progress amid much diplomatic busyness and Russian bombing for emphasis. The chapter carefully weaves the diplomatic and military efforts to expand Asad's control over his country.

Rabinovich and Valensi then turn to levels of the conflict—domestic, regional and international, while a further chapter, added at the end of the book, updates on the period 2019-2020. While a quarter of the Syrian territory remains under the control of the US-supported Kurdish forces, the northern border strip is occupied by Turkey to keep the Kurds out, and a province around Idlib remains occupied by Turkish and Islamic forces, life continues as normal under Asad and the Russians in 60 per cent of the country. "With a set of formal structures wrapped around a core of family, clans, and confidants...in a 'transactional state' in which profiteers, warlords and individuals...take advantage of the war..." (p. 197). The chapters provide a thorough portrayal of Syrian society and the civil war's effect on it, or rather its role in the civil war—the 'Alawi regime in its privileges and militias, the Sunni majority and the other minorities in their protection and security, even the tribes in their fractious autonomy. On the opposition side, effective action has been shattered by the same division seen in Tunisia between secularists and Islamists, the latter further driven by sectarian and tactical doctrine, plus the same division that plagued Iraq after the invasion between the exiled and domestic leadership pretenders and another division between Turkish-supported and US-supported Kurds. The kaleidoscopic twists of the Islamic opposition,

culminating in the hydra-headed *khalif* (califate) of the IS that then shattered into tentacles throughout the Muslim east and Africa, are well portrayed. The opposition never got over it until all that was left was the Idlib pocket and border strip under Turkish protection and the eastern Kurds under American assistance. The Rabinovich-Valensi account is particularly knowledgeable and detailed in its closing sections to the chapter on life in various areas under civil war, including its crushing and dividing cultural impact on society.

The civil war in the midst of the collapse of the international system of established norms and relations sucked two distinct levels of external actors into the black hole of the domestic power vacuum, which Rabinovich and Valensi treat encyclopaedically in separate chapters. While separate treatment of each country allows for a thorough focus on them one by one, the account loses the chance to place the two levels in a larger context of their own. There has always been an Arab Cold War, as Malcolm Kerr pointed out in 1965, but conditions half a century later are different. In the current System of World Disorder, vacuums attract interference from both levels because of intrinsic interest no longer inhibited by external restraint and because of competitive interest in intervening peremptorily before the rival gets in. US restraint gave the go-ahead to Russia, as noted; Iran's interest in encircling Israel and Turkey's interest in retrieving old Ottoman territories and prestige are explored in the book. Others had a negative interest: both the Syrian Sunnis and Israel shared the view that it was better to humour the regime because it was preferable to the Islamic dangers taking over. Iran is deeply invested in Syria to protect its investment in Hezbollah (and vice versa) and to make sure Saudi and its Western allies were not camped next door but above by a visceral hatred of Israel (p. 123). However, as time has gone on, changes in Syrian military leadership have brought pro-Russians to replace Iran-leaning generals.

Turkey's contradictory interests in the area have produced contradictory relations. The two countries mended fences (literally) when Bashar came to power, but the Spring uprising drove them apart. Turkey also felt it cooperated with IS, riding on the tiger's back, and it channelled recruits and even supplies to the khilafa and cooperated with Islamist factions in the Idlib pocket. But Turkey abhors the US-supported Kurdish militia in eastern Syria, and after having been chastised for downing a Russian plane, Turkey made up with Russian activity in Syria and joined Russia in sponsoring the Astana process. Turkey, a NATO member despite appearances, has more live conflicts of interest with the US and with Russia and acts accordingly. Israel's policy toward the Syrian vacuum and others' efforts to fill it is, above all, determined by the Iranian threat, specifically embodied by Hezbollah but more broadly by Iranian arms and personnel on the border. This has led to important efforts at reconciliation with Russia, not markedly successful, and attempts to keep its balance faced with wobbling American policy. In an unstable neighbourhood, Israel is on its own, keeping a nimble policy of sharp defences and mild rapprochements to protect its clear interests.

The Arab states are less nimble; after an ostracism of Syria from the Arab League and a thereby-condemned attempt to mediate in the early days of the uprising, they remain dominated by their own Sunni-Shi'a schism and their attitude toward the Arab Spring's challenge to sitting regimes but drawn in by the attraction of the black hole. Sifting through these contradictions, Saudi Arabia, along with its allies in the Gulf, was an early supporter of the uprising and had its own Salafi resistance group and negotiating initiative but rebuffed, it turned its attention elsewhere and let things be. Qatar has taken a more active role, with its own stronger resistance group, egged on by its own conflict with Saudi. Iraq has pursued a policy dictated by its animosity to Saudi, its affinity to Iran, and its conflict with ISIS rather than by any clear interest of its own. Lebanon's, Jordan's and Egypt's positions in the chinks of these relations are also discussed briefly in the chapter. It would have been interesting to have a summary at the end of the chapter, situating this level of interested parties, each dancing to a different time, within the context of a bumpy floor.

Another chapter addresses the higher level of international relations. The best characterization of this level is Secretary Clinton's "wicked problem", referring in technical terms to a conflict that engages internal and external players with conventional and non-conventional arms following diverse and crisscrossing interests in several salient and more non-salient solutions, a bird nest of agencies and actions. US policy toward Syria has been grounded in ambivalence, not just between interests and actions but between action and inaction. When the *intifada* broke out, Clinton observed that "Syria is not Libya," but Russia's fear that it might be and trigger Western intervention triggered its own intervention instead. Rabinovich and Valensi are as clear and detailed about the internal conflicts within the Obama administration as they were in the previous chapter about intra-Syrian disputes. The Trump administration fares no better in its record and in Rabinovich and Valensi's eyes, although the turns of events it encountered made it even more difficult to pin down an already torn policy. There was some coherence under Secretary Rex Tillerson, but he was soon replaced. By the time the administration had settled down, Asad had pulled Russia into its bed, used the chemical weapons it had foresworn, continued to host the IS hydra despite its loss of a territorial base, launched military campaigns that ruptured US-Russian agreed ceasefires, and gradually moved back into acceptance from the Arab neighbours. Predictably, Rabinovich and Valensi address a brief and approving mention of Trump's support of Israeli policy. They also note that Europe—notably Britain and France—occupy a marginal position alongside the US in the Syria conflict, materially and diplomatically supporting resistance, which is gradually losing. Rabinovich and Valensi succinctly dismiss the Western decision not to provide reconstruction aid as long as Asad is in charge as losing a potential opportunity, but the whole troublesome topic is not examined (p. 193).

As for Russia, everything was the reverse of the US position. Russia had no interest in supporting the uprisings against authoritarian rulers, on the contrary; it had an important political relation and a naval base to maintain; and an interest in keeping the US and the West and the jihadis out. When things went bad in 2015, Russia stepped in to save the regime that had run out of breath. Russia's enhanced presence in Syria called for enhanced relations from other Arab states and so further enhanced Russia's presence in the area. Russia's Astana initiative pulled in formal cooperation with NATO, Turkey, who had just contracted for a Russian air-defence system, and Iran; in the Geneva process, Russia and Syria skillfully hid behind each other ("I would but he won't"). The zigzag process of escalating Russia's presence in the area centred on Syria and radiated into the region.

Yet at the end (if there is an end), Russia emerged with a dominant position and hence a key responsibility but was still unable to pull off a solution to the conflict. Unfortunately, the great unrecognized agent, fatigue, are likely to creep in leaving Russia holding the bag and all that is therein, as the region accepts its presence as the man who came to dinner. Rabinovich and Valensi hint at this outcome without being able to identify any possible source of a catharsis (that Feldman evokes) that could cleanse the region of its habits and exacerbations. That was the aim of the Arab Spring, but by focusing on its engagingly broad and basic demands, it left tough organization and effective agency to the resilient targets of its efforts. Perhaps the greatest, ironic tragedy of all is the descent of the last remaining hopeful case in Tunisia into the depth of authoritarian takeover, the second presidential coup in its history, welcomed by its fatigued, disillusioned People, at least for a while.

The hopeless hope and unproduced promise of Feldman's Arab Winter and Rabinovich's and Valensi's Arab Turmoil rest like a good taste after a bad meal. These two books are well done, with some holes, by careful commentators. One reads like an informed intelligence brief, the other a disquisition that engages the intelligence. One is primarily a historical narrative, the other an interpretation of political agency. If you want to know in detail about the collection of events and actors in and about one country, read Rabinovich and Valensi; if you want to ponder a thoughtful

search for a theme running through one event in three (of four) countries (depending on what you consider the *khilafa*), read Feldman. They're both good, in their way; why should you have to choose?

## **References**

El Raggal A and Ezzat HR (2015) Can a Revolution Be Negotiated?. In: Zartman IW (ed) *Arab Spring: Negotiating in the Shadow of the Intifadat*. University of Georgia Press, pp. 80-115.

Feldman N (2019) *The Arab Winter: A tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mohsen-Finan K (2021) *Tunisia: l'apprentissage de la démocratie*, Nouveau Monde.

Rabinovic I and Valensi C (2021) *Syrian Requiem: The Civil War and Its Aftermath*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Zartman IW (ed) (2015) *Arab Spring: Negotiating in the shadow of the intifadat*. University of Georgia Press.



# CESRAN International

## Global Go to Think Tank Index Report 2020



**#75**

Top Environment  
Policy Think  
Tanks



**#82**

Best Independent  
Think Tanks



**#153**

Top Foreign Policy  
and International  
Affairs Think Tanks