

**The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle, Publisher: Public Affairs, New York 2016, pp. 284.**

Arhama Siddiq<sup>\*</sup>

It is hard to identify the exact moment that the Muslim world cracked, provoking talk of a third world war. The exact date can range from December 2010, when a Tunisian fruit seller set himself on fire, igniting first a people's rebellion and hope around the Arab world, then violent counter-reaction and armed conflict to March 2003, when American tanks cranked north toward Baghdad, starting a war that was not well thought out and spawning an insurgency that consumed first Iraq and later Syria.

*The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* is a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the causes of the Arab uprisings. Marc Lynch, a professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University assesses the popular movements in the Arab world and the international response, both as it was and it should have been. This book ranges widely over the greater Middle East, from the tortured transitions in Egypt and Tunisia to the wars of Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. The author provides a framework for understanding the new politics of the region, explaining what went wrong and suggesting what to expect, rather than offering deeply detailed narratives of each individual country. He argues that these countries have become the central site of a regional proxy war. Those proxy wars and interventions have manifestly changed the dynamics of regional international relations, mostly in destructive and counterproductive ways.

The author describes how the political landscape of an entire region has been unsettled, with much of it given over to anarchy, as proxy wars on behalf of three competing powers—Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia—continue till this day to scar the region. It is a brutal, compelling story of how local wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen became proxies for

---

<sup>\*</sup> *The book reviewer is Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.*

larger conflicts: Saudi Arabia versus Iran (with Qatar and Turkey thrown in, and Israel still eyeing Iran), Shia versus Sunni, Britain, France and a reluctant America firing shots in Libya and Russia supporting the president of a torn up Syria.

The author first deals with Obama's decision regarding the uprisings in Libya. The Obama administration's decision to join NATO and its Arab allies to intervene militarily in Libya stands today as a crucial turning point in the Arab uprisings - one with effects far beyond that country's borders. According to Lynch, the lessons of that intervention remain deeply contested. The intervention succeeded in its short-term goal of protecting Libyan civilians by preventing a near-certain massacre, and helped to remove one of the nastier of the Arab dictators. He also deduces that had Obama not acted, America would certainly have been blamed for allowing the uprising to end in bloodshed.

The author also believes Libya was a decisive turning point, signalling the transformation of the Arab uprisings from peaceful domestic uprisings into a regional proxy war. Marc Lynch claims that Libya's war offered the first violently cautionary tale against seeking democratic change after the dizzying success of protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt. He proffers two conclusions in this regard. Firstly, the NATO intervention showed Arab protestors and autocrats alike that armed insurrection could succeed by attracting external assistance. Secondly, it showed Arab powers that they could convince the West to back their ambitions with military might, but led Russia to block further such United Nations resolutions.

Throughout the book, the author emphasises the epochal and fundamentally transformative nature of the uprisings. The five years since that historic eruption have been cruel to those who hoped for positive change in the Middle East. The entire regional order appears to be in 'freefall'. He warns the reader that, "...these struggles should lead to sober reflections, but we must not take away the wrong lessons since many wrong lessons currently dominate the conventional wisdom," (p. 12).

For Lynch, the failure of the transitions does not prove that Arabs are not ready for democracy. In his own words, "Obama could not have

saved Mubarak or stopped the Arab uprising if he had tried. There is no monarchical exception protecting the Gulf regimes from popular discontent. The resurgence of jihadist groups does not mean they were the real, hidden face of the uprising all along,” (p. 13). However, we should not forget that stronger states are not the solution to the region’s woes. As Lynch points out, autocratic regimes, in their single-minded pursuit of survival, are the root cause of the instability and have fuelled the region’s extremism and conflicts. Moreover, the region’s autocrats, from Damascus to Riyadh, are the problem not the solution.

Lynch offers a different way of making sense of the current regional situation. Lynch summaries it thus: “the Arab uprisings have not failed; the Arab regimes have not destabilised and are not the solution; more forceful intervention would not have saved Syria; the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood does not validate anti-Islamist views; and the Islamic State does not represent real Islam, but the challenge of jihadism will persist long after its state is destroyed,” (p. 245).

He makes clear that when Arab autocratic rulers were unable to meet their people’s expectations for better lives, they created the conditions for greater sectarianism, extremism, and popular discontent that eventually sparked the uprisings. Once these forces were unleashed in 2011, they fired the second arrow, pumping weapons and money into Libya and Syria and backing the al-Sisi regime in Egypt. As Lynch writes, the uprisings did not fail because of devious Islamists or an Arab lack of readiness for democracy, but “primarily because the regimes they challenged killed it.”

Lynch is not an optimist. He sees no end soon, predicting even stronger strains of Islamic extremism as nations, sects, tribes, terror groups and generations all jostle. The lesson, he thinks, is clear if unlikely to be absorbed: The rest of the world, and especially whoever replaces Obama, should stay out. “America can be more or less directly involved,” he writes, “but it will ultimately prove unable to decide the outcome of the fundamental struggles by Arabs over their future.”

*The New Arab Wars* is a compelling, accurate, and comprehensive overview of this turbulent region’s very mixed condition at this historic transitional moment. It is also an important read in light given the

*Book Review (Online)*

ongoing Operation to take back Mosul and the impending American elections and is a must read for anyone looking to understand the roots and trajectories of the Arab uprisings, and their implications for the future of a crucial region.