
Book Review: *The World Community and the Arab Spring*

The World Community and the Arab Spring, edited by Cenap Kakmak and Ali Onur Ozcelik (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). 426 pp., ISBN 978-3-319-60984-3.

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The World Community and the Arab Spring provides in-depth reflections and insightful analysis on how major states, regional actors, and intergovernmental organizations responded to the so-called Arab Spring. It attempts not only to offer a better understanding of how international society dealt with such unprecedented, revolutionary waves in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, but also to evaluate these responses in the light of different global and regional foreign policies. That said, the underlying similarities and differences between the foreign policies of the actors can offer some useful insights that may offer general insights to predict future responses by the global community to similar situations.

This book establishes the congruity between international society and the Arab revolts within the analytical framework of the English School of International Relations theory. The general conviction among scholars of the English School is that international politics is a realm dominated by the dynamics of international society, which is based on the interactions among sovereign states. Interestingly, this theory maintains a linkage between sovereign prerogatives and international moral and legal responsibilities. While each state enjoys rights inherent in full sovereignty, all states have to comply with the international rule of law. From this perspective, the authors of this

book associate international intervention with the actors' responsibilities for protecting people from war crimes and human rights violations, exercised by regimes in the MENA region.

This comprehensive collective work consists of many empirically oriented chapters: The role of the United Nations (UN), as the largest and most internationally represented intergovernmental organization in the world, appears to have been limited in managing the Arab Spring adequately. Likewise, other regional intergovernmental organizations directly or indirectly involved in the matter, such as the European Union (EU), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab League, and the African Union (AU), exert no effective efforts to resolve perfectly the domestic large-scale conflicts that followed the Arab revolts. In the same way, the United States, Russia, and France have sought to secure their interests rather than support the efforts made for the sake of appropriate settlements to the existing disputes. All these chapters examine international responses to the various uprisings and upheavals associated with the Arab Spring. Whatever are the explanatory factors and the hidden goals behind such a range of responses, the results of the protests have been varied, ranging from the recovery of democracy in Tunisia to the ongoing civil wars in Syria and Yemen.

Addressing the UN's role in managing the exceptional situation in the Middle East, this book argues that the Arab Spring was not considered by the UN as a matter of urgency that required concerted action by the international community. The UN is judged to be ineffective, mostly due to its institutional constraints and inherent weaknesses. However, the General Assembly (GA) remained attentive to developments in the region during the unfolding events of the Arab Spring. This attention has been expressed through the work of the Human Rights Council (HRC) and special commissions of inquiry. In this respect, the UN adopted many resolutions to address the escalating violence in Libya and Syria, in relation to which the GA reacted strongly in the light of the grave human rights abuses and international humanitarian law violations committed against peaceful protesters and demonstrators in these armed conflicts, emphasizing the international legal responsibility of the Syrian and Libyan governments. On the other hand, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has adopted two different approaches in dealing with the security issues of the Arab Spring. Whereas it was able to pass a resolution allowing military intervention in Libya, the UNSC remained a bystander to the atrocities in Syria. The UNSC resolutions have been selective in its actions, particularly due to the diverse views upheld by

the United States and Russia over this or that issue. That said, the case of Syria provides a telling example of the failure and the limits of global governance mechanisms in preventing and managing such crises thus largely undermining peace and security.

The EU generally adopts a differentiated approach for every country of the region, acting according to the specificities of each one. Such an approach proposed a “more-for-more” principle that assumed that countries in the south Mediterranean region which pursued deeper and more rapid reforms would be able to count on considerably more support from the EU. Critically speaking, one can say that the EU’s support and assistance to the nations of the Arab Spring appear to be limited in comparison with what is needed to be done. Furthermore, the EU’s stance towards the Arab Spring in the southern Mediterranean has been somewhat paradoxical, since the European response to the re-establishment of military rule in Egypt came against the so-called “more-for-more” principle adopted by the organization: “Partnership for Democracy” in the southern neighborhood. The EU has prioritized the interests of its members more than any other considerations. In the same way, both the AU’s and the GCC’s responses were also widely criticized as being ineffective and inconsistent in Libya, Syria, or elsewhere in the Middle East.

Dealing with the responses of major powers to the Arab Spring, the authors demonstrate that pragmatism and rationality were the main elements in the American and Russian reactions towards the revolutionary situations in the MENA. While the United States as a “global hegemon” sought to protect its economic and geopolitical interests in the Middle East, the ambitions of both Russia and China were to consolidate their partnerships with relevant countries in the area, and to further strengthen their role in world community affairs in general. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, China swiftly moved to establish ties with the transitional authorities in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, and also pursued closer relations with entrenched authoritarian leaderships in the region to secure its interests and expand its influence in these countries.

Turning to the role of the regional players, Turkey’s foreign reaction to the Arab revolts was described to be one of “prudent optimism.” Although Ankara adopts the so-called “zero-problems” policy with its neighbors,¹ it

1. A “Zero problems with neighbors” policy consists of sharing interests instead of provoking crisis. This policy adopted by Turkey aims to eliminate all the problems in the country’s relations with its neighbors, or at least to minimize them as much as possible. Accordingly, Turkey seemingly exerts active efforts to solve problems through peaceful means, in line with a win-win approach.

actively supported the opposition groups in the region, and further stressed that the Arab governments being challenged should be responsive to popular demands for political change.

Iran considered the Arab Spring a golden opportunity to earn the respect and sympathy of revolutionaries in several Arab countries. Therefore, it came out in full support of the uprisings in both Tunisia and Egypt. Ideological considerations were the main element in dealing with the Arab uprisings, especially in the case of Yemen and Bahrain, where the Shiite majority was being ruled by a Sunni regime. Conversely, Iran supported the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad that it considered a key factor in its ability to exercise control over the Shiite militia, Hezbollah, manipulate the political landscape of Lebanon, and dominate the Middle East in general.

This volume exhaustively examines a vast range of upheavals related to the Arab Spring. Its significance is the interesting research findings it brings to the scholarly community in its exploration of such anti-government revolutionary protests in the Middle East region. What is more significant is that the insights provided by this study may be made use of in any potentially similar situation in the future. No chapter, however, addresses the uprisings in light of the “conspiracy hypothesis” and “creative chaos” theory, wherein numerous analysts claim that the unrest in the Arab world is a secret plan contrived by the great powers and the West in general. In this regard, it is said that the United States has a plan to reshape the MENA in such a way that the outcomes of uprisings will be aligned more closely with America’s vision for the area and in the service of Western interests. This book neither highlights the real underlying reasons driving these unexpected events nor does it explain why the uprisings occurred in some countries and not in others. The authors say nothing about the “hidden hand” behind the present chaotic environment, confusing perspectives, and uncertain future in the region.

However, after the Arab Spring, such a policy has failed in its relations with Middle Eastern neighbors, especially due to the events in Syria.