

# The Muslim World's Counter-Jihad

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As the Arab Spring drifts toward winter, a small number of books has appeared that attempt to explain the rebellion that spread across North Africa and the Middle East this year. Unsurprisingly, most of them read like scrambled attempts to generate instant analysis. Other efforts appear to be longer-trend studies caught short by the explosion of popular revolt. (For an essential assessment of how Middle East specialists mostly failed to see the potential for revolt, see the essay on the subject by F. Gregory Gause III in the July-August issue of *Foreign Affairs*.)

Robin Wright's *Rock the Casbah*, published over the summer, stands apart. It is neither instant nor obsolescent analysis. It is instead the work of an astute, longtime observer of the region who grasps the underlying forces that have brought about the revolts.

Among these forces is what Wright, a former reporter for *The Washington Post*, calls the "counter-jihad." This is the most important insight in her book, and one that may cause some grumbling among other specialists—especially those who last visited the region when doing fieldwork for their dissertations years ago. Wright uses the term to capture, expansively yet concisely, a wave of anti-jihadist and anti-Al Qaeda sentiment that has washed over the Muslim world, from Indonesia and India to Egypt and Tunisia.

"For the majority of Muslims today," Wright says, "the central issue is . . . a struggle within the faith itself to rescue Islam's central values from a small but virulent minority. The new confrontation is effectively a jihad against The Jihad. And it epitomizes the new phase in the Islamic resurgence." This counter-jihad was not a direct catalyst for the uprisings themselves. But it is central to the emerging zeitgeist of the Muslim world, a zeitgeist characterized by a growing intolerance not only for unresponsive and aging regimes,

but also for religiously inspired violence against civilians. The counter-jihad, according to Wright, finds its most profound expression in a "new cultural rhythm—in the arts, literature, film, and music" of the Muslim world generally.

*Rock the Casbah* devotes most of its pages to this cultural wave, offering portraits of artists and sketches of their works. These include rapper El Général and his "Rais Lebled," which swept Tunisia to become a theme song for the revolution, and Egyptian-born playwright Yussef El Guindi's "Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes," with its

**Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World**

by Robin Wright.

*Simon and Schuster, 2011.*

dark take on Muslim stereotypes. Wright argues that popular culture has become a primary conduit of dissent in the Muslim world, and that the themes explored through today's cultural ferment—rage against corruption, economic stasis, and unemployment; and a general desire to strike back at the extremist minority that has attempted to define the Muslim majority—all helped shape the protests that have occurred this year in all 22 countries of North Africa and the Middle East.

*Rock the Casbah* does not provide a definitive explanation of the Arab Spring's beginnings, but it does offer compelling insight into why revolutions against ever more sclerotic autocracies were finally sparked even though the forces that might have ignited them earlier—unemployment, the youth bulge—had been in place for so long.

The book also offers a positive vision, of which policy makers should take heed, for the Muslim world's prospects. Al Qaeda is no longer—Wright would argue that it never really was—the nodal point of political belief in the Muslim world. And Samuel Huntington's antiquated "clash of civilizations" thesis, which predicted bloody contests between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, is no guide to the future. Something else is afoot: acceptance of modernization, yet with an Islamic face. ■

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