

Book Reviews

Holliday, Shabnam J. and Philip Leech (Eds.) *Political Identities and Popular Uprisings in the Middle East*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 228 pp., US \$ 120.00 [Hardback], US \$ 39.95 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-78348-449-2.

Reviewed by Parmida Esmailpour

Shabnam J. Holliday and Philip Leech's timely volume on the protests and uprisings in the Middle East, known as the 'Arab Spring', advances a cogent and critical argument for reorienting the body of literature on this subject. This is because they take particular issue with the terms used to describe the uprisings — the 'Arab Spring' or the 'Arab Awakening' — claiming that such terms are "misleading." (p. 2). As they argue, "it was not Arabs alone who have been protesting for political or social change and/or against their governments.... *non-Arab* populations of the Middle East have also witnessed, endured and participated in protests and uprisings of their own." (p. 2). Accordingly, they claim there is a "need for analyses that look beyond an approach that pockets Arabs together and in isolation from their Iranian, Israeli, Kurdish and Turkish neighbours and/or fellow citizens." (p. 7). To examine these issues, the volume's contributors discuss eight detailed case studies — Iran, Palestine, Israel, Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan — in which they demonstrate the commonalities between the popular uprisings in the Arab and non-Arab Middle East in order to "encourage broader engagement with the region beyond the Arab World." (p. 180).

Following the editors' introductory overview, the second chapter by Shabnam J. Holliday and Paola Rivetti employs two approaches to deconstruct the heterogeneous identities and political discourses in Iran's 'Green Movement'. In the third chapter, Nicole F. Watts examines the Sulaimani protests in Iraqi Kurdistan and presents two competing versions of Kurdish national identity. In the fourth chapter, Philip Leech discusses two major waves of protests in the West Bank against the Palestinian Authority from 2011-2012, and in chapter five, Giulia Daniele examines grassroots activism in Israel during the same protests. In chapter six, Lorenzo Trombetta explores civil society networks in the Syrian conflict and discusses Syrian national identity. In chapter seven, Fernando Carvajal takes stock of the diversity of political identities in Yemen during its revolution. In chapter eight, Brecht De Smet pursues a philosophical line of inquiry regarding Egypt's Tahrir Square and the concept of 'the people'. The last chapter (prior to the conclusion) turns to Tunisia; Rory McCarthy examines the evolution of the post-Islamist Ennahdha party ideology in the context of the uprisings which started in 2010.

In addition to challenging the "artificial restriction of analysis to the so-called 'Arab World'", which Holliday and Leech label "methodological regionalism" (p. 180), through these diverse case studies, and in spite of the commonalities that bridge the Arab and non-Arab divide, Holliday and Leech suggest that the term 'Arab Spring' itself reinforces the narrative of "a singular, transformative 'spring'", which problematically reduces a broad collection of uprisings to a single phenomenon (p. 2, 12).

At its core, this volume is interested in the "construction and reconstruction of political identities during protests or uprisings, as well as in the aftermath," which they broadly define as "the ways in which agents (individuals or groups of people) identify themselves and their interests in relation to established power substructures at the state and/or national level." (p. 178; 3). The essays in their volume elucidate the conditions under which identities become meaningful and highlight the various ways identities interact and intersect with one another. This emphasis on identity politics, as well as a concurrent emphasis on individualism and political agency, gives rise to a rich discussion of the plurality and fluidity of identity. (pp. 7, 177-8). Their case studies illustrate that "Arab identity continues to exist alongside other identities," and that "Arab and non-Arab alike... state identity (Iran, Yemen, Tunisia, Syria) and, indeed, pseudo-state

identity (Palestine, Iraqi Kurdistan) continue to be important despite and in spite of other political identities.” (p. 7). For this reason, it is “the question of how to appropriately interpret the relationship of agency and structure” that is central to their volume, and not “the arbitrary distinction between the ‘Arab’ and the ‘non-Arab’ Middle East” (p. 5). The ahistorical nature of much of existing scholarship on political identity in the Middle East is also a point of contention for Holliday and Leech, who emphasize that identity is not fixed in space nor time, especially “in the context of a deeply interconnected region and a rapidly changing globalising world.” (p. 181).

Another central discussion in the volume is the seemingly paradoxical prevalence of both secular and Islamist or post-Islamist politics. Holliday and Leech denounce the “false dichotomy of Islamism versus secular authoritarianism, or... Islamism versus secular ‘democracy.’” (p. 181). Their volume depicts how secularist and Islamist/ post-Islamist politics are mutually reinforcing as “secular politics “[open spaces] for long repressed Islamist movements to seek elected office and legitimate political power” (p. 8).

The volume, thus is unique in many respects. The chapters are grounded in critical approaches to politics and the contributors draw liberally from the work of Antoni Gramsci, Edward Said, and Marxist thought (p. 5, 9). Much weight is given to subaltern groups and agents of “counter-hegemonic strategies,” and the contributors are careful to unpack and undermine the prevailing “essentialist, often orientalist, accounts that claim sectarianism as the sole explanation for protest” (pp. 10-11). The volume itself can be seen as an act of protest against Eurocentric accounts of the protests and uprisings across the Arab and non-Arab Middle East. Concurrently, the volume addresses a prominent gap in the literature by calling into question “the notion that ‘the Arab World’ can be reasonably separated from the broader region” (p. 3). Finally, Holliday and Leech capitalize on the unique (though unfortunate) topicality of their volume which coincides with the “ongoing civil war in Syria and Yemen,” “the presence of the Salafi Da’ish,” and the renewed salience of “the ‘Kurdish issue’” (p. 4). As a result, their volume makes a sophisticated contribution to our understanding of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’.

*About the Reviewer: **Parmida Esmailpour** is a Master’s Student and Research Assistant, Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia, Canada.*