Book Review: The Arab Spring, Democracy and Security: Domestic and International Ramifications, Efraim Inbar (ed)

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Efraim Inbar (Ed.)
The Arab Spring, Democracy and Security: Domestic and International Ramifications

To offer analysis on an on-going political event is always a challenging task. Yet, the “Arab Spring” has given rise to many questions about the past, the present and the future of the Arab world and the Middle East more generally. The Arab Spring, Democracy and Security: Domestic and International Ramifications addresses some of these questions. The chapters of this edited volume have been written by selected Israeli scholars focusing on “issues such as democratization, the role of economic factors in political change and explanations for variations in regime stability in the Middle East.” The relationship between internal and external politics is also explored while special emphasis is given to the impact of the “Arab Spring” on Israel and its neighbourhood.

The book is comprised of eight chapters. Efraim Inbar, in his introduction, provides a background on the “Arab Spring” phenomenon; he makes a comprehensive review of the most important Arab revolts (Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria), refers to their implications on multiple levels, and touches upon the contribution of the different authors. In the following chapters Gabriel Ben-Dor focuses on the processes of democratization in the Middle East and the Arab world, Hillel Frisch deals with “the emerging Middle East balance of power,” Eytan Gilboa writes on the United States responses and policies towards the “Arab Spring,” and Alexander Bligh examines the phenomenon of the “Palestinian apathy.” Next, Boaz Ganor looks at “the challenge of terrorism” and how it is affected by the “Arab Spring,” Gil Feiler analyses “the economic implications of the Arab Spring,” Samuel Sandler analyses the “linkage between Israel’s domestic and foreign policies” and their relation to the “Arab Spring,” while Efraim Inbar concludes the book with a chapter on “the strategic implications for Israel.”

Overall, the book succeeds to a great extent in providing insights on the “Arab Spring” and the policies of different actors, among other things. Nevertheless, the book presents three kinds of weaknesses which I will discuss in the remaining part of this review: the spectrum of subjects covered in the book, the extent to which the linkage of internal and external policies has been successful, and patterns of political/academic tendencies in the book mainly because all authors come from Israel.

First, although the individual chapters make mention to and analyse a variety of issues, including the role of different regional powers, economic, political and cultural aspects, international ramifications and great powers policies, the scope of the book is limited if we take into account its title. More chapters could have been included regarding the role of international and regional powers – apart from Israel – like Turkey, Iran, and Russia, as well as the European Union. In that sense, the book was perhaps a little more regionally focused than it should have been, as the “Arab Spring” had implications beyond its region; also, the focus on Israel is not suggested in the book title even though it is a central theme.

At the same time it seems that a methodology of academic coherence was not pursuit in terms of the structure of the book and the selection of chapters, apart from the emphasis given to the implications for Israel; in other words, a specific levels-of-analysis, theoretical,
geographic, or other approach is not clearly followed throughout the book. Efforts where indeed made to explore democracy and security dynamics, but especially the first chapters were rather descriptive and repetitive with respect to the “Arab Spring” timeline of events – given that Inbar’s introduction had this role, the repetition of events could have been avoided. On the other hand, security is more often than not addressed based on the narrow understanding of national security, with two exceptions being Gil Feiler’s chapter on the economic implications of the “Arab Spring” and Boaz Ganor’s examination of terrorism – a mostly transnational issue.

Second, in terms of the book’s effort to advance a linkage between domestic and external policies in its analyses there is some – though limited – success. Shmuel Sandler’s chapter makes a good job in that respect considering Israel, as this was the original aim; yet, one could argue that a specific theoretical approach to linking these two levels would be more appropriate, rather than an event-based analysis – i.e. the Iranian nuclear threat, the Palestinians, terrorism and Turkish-Israeli relations. Alexander Bligh’s chapter on the Palestinian apathy amidst the “Arab Spring” also stands out as it demonstrates a good integration of the domestic, the regional and the international, with important information, albeit without a specific theoretical basis. Gabriel Ben-Dor’s chapter on the democratization process of the “Arab Spring” also made an effort to link domestic and external policies and developments. On the plus side the chapter is characterised by a consistent analysis based on democratization theory; although, the sections of the chapter do not always blend in well together and the linkage between the domestic and the external is not very clear. Other chapters also made mention to domestic and external dynamics but there was not a consistent effort for a systematic linkage between the two.

Lastly, the fact that all authors are Israelis has one advantage and one disadvantage. On the one hand these scholars know the region – and Israel – well, and this is very positive considering the book’s focus on the impact of the “Arab Spring” on Israel. On the other hand, there seems to be a largely one-sided political perspective throughout the book which manifests in three ways: 1) there is a static understanding of (political) Islam and a tendency to demonize it by presenting it as the main cause of many regional evils, such as the radicalization of the newly-emerged regimes, terrorism and foreign policy changes in countries like Turkey. This might well be the case, but perhaps a more dynamic, in-depth, and less simplistic approach to political Islam would be more appropriate.

2) There is a strong feeling of caution towards Turkey – not to mention Iran – throughout the book. A case in point is Inbar’s claim that “A combination of nationalism, neo-Ottoman nostalgia and Islamic-jihadist impulses has pushed Turkey into an aggressive posture on several regional issues” (p.156). Turkey has indeed been more assertive the past years, and Inbar provides examples, but the adjectives given to Turkey have not been thoroughly analysed. Inbar goes as far as to say that Turkish troops in Cyprus might even advance further and take over the rest of the Island, which is a very serious and improbable scenario to suggest; in any case it is not sufficiently analysed in the chapter to warrant the suggestion.

3) The authors of the book, because of their emphasis on Israeli policies come often across as mostly geo-strategists rather than geo-political analysts. That is not wrong in and of itself but
the reader gets the feeling that the book was primarily written to advise Israel rather than analyse the “Arab Spring.” In that respect the authors are often understood to be emotionally engaged in their analysis while the nature of the book reminds us of the task that the current Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu\textsuperscript{1}, undertook more than a decade ago when he wrote *Strategic Depth* as a geo-strategist giving policy advice to Turkey.

In general, it becomes obvious that there is indeed a historically rooted security culture of geopolitical insecurity among academics and politicians alike in Israel, and this manifests in the book. It may be justified but at the same time it could sometimes prevent outside-of-the-box thinking and perhaps lead to biased conclusions, as opposed to a more objective and sober analysis.

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\textsuperscript{1} Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu* [Strategic Depth: Turkey’s International Position], Aksaray, İstanbul, Küre Yayınları, 2001.
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