

The Journey to the Arab Spring: The Ideological Roots of the Middle East Upheaval in Arab Liberal Thought

by David Govrin

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Spring is always too short, it seems, yet it is always awaited. “Is the spring coming?” asks Robin, the locked child in Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*. “What is it like?”

“Well,” answers Mary, “it is the sun shining on the rain and the rain falling on the sunshine, and things pushing up and working under the earth.”

Four years into the Arab Spring, we have indeed seen the sun shining on the rain, the rain falling on the sun, and much movement beneath the soil and sands of the Middle East. With Islamist powers on the rise, a bleeding Syria, a crumbling Iraq, and a growing Islamic State, it might be considered brazen for someone to write yet another book on the Arab Spring. However, Govrin’s work is important and useful exactly because of this complicated context and “things working under the earth.” The Arab Spring, Govrin argues, certainly did not occur in a vacuum. Although it was triggered by a certain sequence of events, it was influenced by some two decades of liberal discourse. That discussion, enhanced and propagated by the developments of new means of media and technology, is one of the factors that led to the events that brought down so many Arab regimes and destabilized others.

Adapted from Govrin’s PhD dissertation at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, this book takes us on a journey with a unique group of Arab intellectuals who have been working from inside and outside the Middle East since the 1990s to liberalize and modernize the Arab political reality. These individuals, often referred to as the “New Arab Liberals,” are characterized by their (often controversial) work, which offers a different understanding of core issues, including governance, morality, civil rights, and the role of religion in state and society. Govrin, a senior Israeli diplomat who served in Cairo and New York and who currently directs the department of Jordan and North Africa at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, presents a view that is mostly academic, although his perceptions had to have been influenced by the fact that he is a resident of the region and has experienced the turmoil up close.

Arab liberalism—a term still perceived by some as an oxymoron—has been pronounced dead by many prominent scholars, Western and Arabs alike. Govrin cites Khalid al-Dakhil, a columnist for *al-Hayyat* and a professor at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, who wrote about the basic difficulties in Arab society with the concept of freedom: “[T]he opposition to liberalism in Arab Society is almost total: the states reject it because it destroys the foundations upon which it was established, and the people reject it because it does not fit their cultural heritage, and the elite is incapable of treating it as a binding ideology” (p. 4). Lebanese author Jihad al-Khazen agrees with Dakhil by saying that “freedom is a planet alien to our part of the Arab world. Whenever implanted, it dies.” Yet, both authors, as Govrin skillfully demonstrates while analyzing their work, refuse to abide by their own assertions as they continue their fight for further

liberalization of “that planet.” In essence, this is the paradox Govrin tackles throughout his work. Despite his emphasis on the visionaries and dreamers of the region, Govrin eventually leans toward the realists. Unfortunately, the significant efforts of the liberal camp will not be easily translated into political gains. Nevertheless, they should be considered important and significant to the emerging new realities in the region.

Govrin’s book is divided into two main parts. The first offers a historical portrait of the Arab liberal discourse, covering the period from 1876 to the end of the twentieth century. The second focuses on the work and influence of the liberals in the last quarter of the twentieth century (although often it reaches much beyond that and deals with events that occurred as late as 2012). The insightful introduction to both parts highlights the methodological problems associated with an attempt at studying Arab liberalism. Govrin notes that terms such as liberalism [liberaliya]; freedom or liberty [hurriya]; secularism [almaniyya or al-zamaniyya]; pluralism [ta’addudiyya]; and citizenship or civic society [al-muwatana or al-mujtama al-madani] do not always carry the same meaning when translated into Arabic. Many of these and other related terms are also new to the Arabic language, certainly within the context of “democratic discourse.” Govrin provides a useful overview of the relevant terms while creating an appropriate cultural and lingual filter through which the journey to the Arab Spring can be better understood.

The epilogue is the only part that really focuses on the more contemporary events that have shaken the Middle East since 2000. Unfortunately, it is also the shortest part of this otherwise very detailed essay and does not offer enough information on the important decade 2000–10 in which important events triggered the specific timing of the Arab turmoil. Although some references to these years are interspersed throughout the book, this concluding section would have benefitted from an attempt to link the previous chapters to the actual emergence of the Arab Spring. Govrin’s book also offers a very useful appendix with a summary of the key writings of the main figures featured in the book. A detailed index is also included, which is useful in light of the number of times names and terms are cross-referenced.

Much of the academic research of the last two decades has focused on the rise of Islam and Islamic groups and ideologies. Consequently, not enough attention has been paid to the serious research on Arab liberal and secular forces. Govrin’s work offers an important contribution to our understanding of significant intellectual developments in the Arab world preceding the Arab Spring and leading to it. Through analyzing the statements and writings of public intellectuals such as George Tarabishi and Burhan Ghaliyun (Syria); Hazem Saghie (Lebanon); Abd al-Moneim Said, Muhammad Sa’id Ashmawi Amin al-Mhadi, and Tarek Heggy (Egypt); Al Afif al-Ahbar and Moncef al-Marzouki (Tunisia); Khalid al-Dakhil (Saudi Arabia); and others, Govrin is able to present a broad spectrum of opinions, ideas, and views. These join an emerging liberal mosaic that has already been a visible presence in the Arab world for some time now. He correctly points to the diversity of these individuals, even though they often share one another’s views about Islam, religion and state, or Israel. They are, in some cases, partially endorsed by the establishment, and in others, completely rejected by it. Still, these individuals and the movement they helped create share a vision of liberalization and democratization and they find different ways (from within the establishment or outside of it) to pursue it.

Justifiably, Govrin seeks to highlight the cases in which these intellectual voices succeeded in crossing from the realm of ideas into the realm of public life. Moncef al-Marzouki (b. 1945), son of a Tunisian Qadi, is perhaps the most distinguished one. Marzouki spent over twenty years outside his country and studied in Morocco and France. He chose to return to Tunisia in 1979 and renew his political activity. He served from 1997–2000 as the first president of the Arab Council for Human Rights and was elected interim president of Tunisia in December 2011. Burhan Ghaliyun (b. 1945) is a French Syrian professor of sociology at the Sorbonne who positioned himself as a liberal and a critic of the Assad regime. In 1983, he was one of the founders of the Arab Organization for Human Rights and later led the Syrian Cultural and Social Forum, an organization of anti-Assad Syrian expatriates. He intensified his political activity during the period of the Damascus Spring and in 2011 was elected the first head of the Syrian National Council (SNC) that was established as an umbrella group to unify the opposition to Assad's government. It is important to mention that both Marzouki and Ghaliyun spent significant amounts of time outside their native countries and were greatly influenced by their experiences in the West. This is indeed a testament to the "influence of Arab liberals and their status in shaping the contents of the political discourse and in consolidating the reform process in their countries" (p. 272). Another example is Abd al-Moneim Sa'id, a well-known Egyptian writer who was able to continue his work as a liberal while still being connected to the regime as a member of the Shura Committee, the National Democratic Party, and the International Alliance for the Arab–Israeli Peace.

Govrin places Abd al-Moneim in his own category as an "establishment liberal," but mentions a number of others who continue their work as liberals while maintaining some ties with their respective regimes ("semi-establishment liberals"). The fact that some Arab regimes are willing to "tolerate" and even recognize some of the liberals is, in and of itself, a testament to the growing liberal influence.

On the other hand, the few aforementioned examples also highlight a deeper question about influence and legacy. After all, aside from the Tunisian case (that provides other interesting examples not mentioned in the book, such as the blogger-turned-minister Slim Amamou), liberal voices appear to be largely absent in the post-Arab Spring reality. Hence, is government recognition a sign of growing liberal influence or rather a strategy of cooptation aimed at curtailing the reach of some of the stronger voices that the regimes seek to keep at bay? Very little attention is paid to that interesting question in Govrin's book; perhaps it should be the subject of a consequent study.

Govrin's book is thorough, methodical, and very well researched. It offers an overall thesis regarding the role of the neo-liberals in the recent wave of uprisings: Govrin argues that the new Arab liberals have succeeded in presenting the Arab public with an alternative to the discourse of Arab nationalistic or Islamist state visions. This alternative takes the form of an outlook centered upon a civil, secular, and more democratic state. These demands for political reform gained an audience and helped trigger the turmoil that started as an Arab Spring in December 2010, and which, for other reasons, has become more aggressive and violent since.

The concluding paragraph of the book returns to the aforementioned paradox, or

“challenge”: “Our Arab World talks about freedom while practicing despotism: it
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boasts the state of law while abandons justice; it raises slogans against corruption while [it] sponsors the matrimony between capital and power. Yes, we need democracy but do we really deserve it, are we ready for it?” (p. 277). This question, posed by Egyptian journalist Imad al-Din Adib, captures an important moment in a region that perhaps, in hindsight, has just witnessed its own “French Revolution” and is beginning to count the seventy years it might take for its freedom to arrive. In that sense, the journey has only just began.