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Book Review

Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2016, 304 pp.

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Marc Lynch's latest book, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, is a revitalizing take on the social and political transformations in the Middle Eastern region during and immediately after the Arab Spring. A professor of political science and international affairs at the George Washington University, Lynch has distinguished himself as a valuable voice on Middle Eastern studies, having previously published several books and articles on the topic and founding the Project on Middle East Political Science. This latest contribution to the field is not merely out of academic interest, but it is instead deeply rooted in the author's perception of the crisis in Libya and the resulting NATO-led intervention in March 2011.

As underlined in the preface, Lynch was one of the early advocates of American intervention in Libya – a position that was all the more significant as he was writing for *Foreign Policy* at the time and meeting routinely with Obama administration officials. The failure of that intervention is what led the author to re-consider his initial analysis on both Libya and the entire Arab uprising; he sought to return to the events of 2011 and understand them through a new, regional perspective. This book is the culmination of those efforts.

Lynch's work is divided in nine chapters, each following a chronological development of the uprisings. Almost all states are focused on, since the drive behind the book is to connect the revolts in a way that exposes the underlying regional tensions and ambitions, without neglecting the importance of local factors.

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The first chapter, *The New Arab Wars*, stands as an overview of the topic to be discussed, presenting the context in which the revolts started to manifest and their aftermath, the newly emerging proxy wars, the empowered Arab societies and the path of the Islamists.

The Arab Uprising is seen as one single event comprised of its constituent local stories, each connected through regional dynamics and the rapid flow of information. Taking into account the particularities of peoples' dissatisfaction is important for understanding the idiosyncrasies of each case, but ultimately they are all part of a larger narrative, one that combines the Saudi-Iran cold war, the competition between the Gulf states, the role of international actors (US, Russia) with the development of social media and social mobilization.

In explaining the situation before the fateful winter of 2010-11, the author challenges the popular nostalgia of returning to a pre-uprising order by arguing that the events which took place in the 2000s were far from the stability yearned for. Thus, he considers as an example the consequence of the US-led invasion of Iraq, namely the indirect empowerment of Iran which, in turn, triggered the anxieties of the Gulf leaders. Having lost a strong military power that could balance Iran, the Gulf states felt that the regional order was tilting to their disadvantage. The two opposing blocs – Sunni dictators led by Saudi Arabia vs. a "resistance bloc" led by Iran – became increasingly relevant in the new arena opening up during the Arab Spring.

Another point argued for in the first chapter is that of America's role in the region. Lynch positions himself once more against the widely accepted perceptions of Obama's foreign policy, which usually criticize the lack of assertiveness employed. Instead, he remarks a trend in American policies being predictable to regional players, who would be able to construct their own policies in a more or less undisturbed manner.

Obama's restraint in response to the revolts and to Syria, however, was unexpected to the US allies in the region, as they felt abandoned and even distrustful towards a president who was willing and eager to ease tensions with Iran as well. Therefore, "the pattern of erratic behavior and catastrophic policies [of Arab leaders] could be considered Obama's fault only in that others planned for a different American policy."[1]

The second chapter, *The Arab Uprising*, takes a detailed look at the first few months of the revolts by highlighting the role that regional politics

[1] Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2016, p. 20

played in each particular case. We start with Tunisia and the fall of Ben Ali, which was able to ignite such a massive response in other Arab states due to its inspiring success and its popularization by the Qatari network Al-Jazeera.

We move on to Egypt, where regional dynamics are much more evident. The fall of Mubarak was a turning point for three main reasons. First, it brought the protest movement closer to the heart of the Middle East – "Egypt's uprising moved the challenge from the periphery to the core of the Arab world, striking at the heart of the American and Saudi-led regional order."[2] Secondly, it revealed the new approach that Obama would be prone to adopt in reacting to the popular revolts that aimed to overthrow close US allies. Siding with the protestors and demanding a peaceful transfer of power in Egypt, Obama signaled to Mubarak's allies that their own regimes were not safe and indestructible. Moreover, Arab leaders were discontented that Obama would support a democratic movement over a long-time American ally.

Finally, the Egyptian president's overthrow opened new doors for Qatari influence in post-Mubarak elections, given their network's significant efforts to unite the revolutionary euphoria across the region into a single, broader story. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood (which were backed by Qatar) now stood a chance to be a part of the new democratic chapter opening up in Egypt. Much to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates' dismay, this was actually the case a little over a year later, as Islamist candidate Mohamed Morsi won the presidential election.

Yemen and Bahrain are the two final subjects of analysis. They offer compelling case studies for grasping Saudi Arabia's apprehension of Iranian-supported domestic unrest. In Yemen, for instance, "Saudi Arabia had long maintained a strong position […] through extensive contacts with tribes and an alliance with the long-ruling President Ali Abdullah Saleh."[3]

After the protests in Yemen indicated that Saleh would not survive as head of state, the Gulf Cooperation Council – with Saudi Arabia in the lead – intervened by proposing a transition plan, which "provided for a transfer of power to Saleh's vice president along with a 'National Dialogue' on a new constitution and a promise of amnesty to persuade Saleh to go along."[4] Of course, the promise of immunity offered to Saleh was a very controversial aspect of the plan and it would leave Saleh practically unharmed by the revolts –

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 53
[3] *Ibidem,* p. 64
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 70

what's more, he would remain an important regional player, opposing his successor and even the Gulf states that offered him the deal in the first place.

Bahrain is its own tragic story. Lynch stresses upon the deeply regional character of the uprising's outcome in Bahrain – a state that "was widely recognized to be a Saudi dependency, and its regime a red line in the long-running Saudi-Iranian cold war."[5] The Saudi-led intervention in Bahrain to suppress the revolt was met with silence from the ever-vocal Qatari network Al-Jazeera, while the consensus between the GCC states required for the operation was a first and a last since 2011.

Chapter 3, *Intervention and Militarization*, is dedicated to Libya, which became one of the most internationalized conflicts in the entire Arab Uprising narrative. Largely due to the use of military forces against protestors and the ensuing violence between the two factions, Libya was intensely covered by Al-Jazeera, which shared brutal videos and images that had been posted on social media. The international community, unlike in the case of Bahrain, was horrified. It was not long until many voices both in the Arab world and in the US (the author included) argued for intervention in Libya to put an end to the state violence.

The military intervention that eventually began on 19 March 2011 by a NATO-led coalition had profound implications for Libya and for the entire region. First of all, it was radical for the sheer fact that it "violated another core norm governing Arab politics: opposition to Western intervention. […] The Arab League's invitation to NATO to intervene militarily against one of their own was thus revolutionary."[6]

Secondly, Libya itself would suffer from the decentralized character of the intervention, which brought about the proliferation of militias. As Lynch points out, the numerous externally-backed militias fighting the government's forces relied less and less on cooperation among themselves to that end, as it became apparent that Qaddafi would not last long. The issue became, then, to acquire weapons and resources that would allow each militia a great deal of influence and a position in the National Transitional Council.

Addressing the common perception that a peacekeeping operation employed in Libya after Qaddafi's fall would have led to stabilization and would have redeemed the intervention's success in the first place, Lynch remains skeptical. He does not undermine the failure of the intervention in Libya, but he argues that an international peacekeeping force would not

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 74

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 81

have been a guarantor of stability in the transitional phase. Quite the contrary, it could have potentially been seen as an intruder to Libya's domestic affairs, constrained the transition process and made it virtually impossible for the forces to withdraw. Therefore, he claims that "the retroactive advocacy for such a force often seems to be more a matter of finding an excuse for the intervention's failure which would not compromise future interventions."[7]

Chapter 4 concerns the case of Syria, where regional dynamics were an incontestable reality. As Iran's main Arab state ally, Syria was essential for a balance of power between the "Moderate Bloc" and the "Resistance Bloc." The eruption of protests in Syria quickly turned into an insurgency, with Iran's adversaries doing everything in their power to intensify the revolts to a point of no return, while Iran and consequent backers of Assad got deeply involved to keep the government in power.

The author concentrates on the debate that emerged around the prospect of intervention in Syria. Not only was there no political consensus among American decision-makers and policy advisors, but the Syrian opposition itself did not form a unified voice arguing for intervention. As Lynch mentions, resistance to the United States and Israel was very deeply ingrained in Syria's foreign policy, which "for the opposition, it represented a real challenge: How could those calling to bring down Assad appeal to an enormously unpopular Western alliance for support without burning all credibility with the Syrian public?"[8]

As the debate went on, the situation in Syria was worsening through the escalating violence and the militarization of the insurgency. By the spring of 2012, Syria's uprising had become an arena for proxy war. The funding and arming of rebel groups by competing powers served to drag on the civil war to a point where neither side could back down. What arose in the Syrian military quagmire was a manifestation of the security dilemma: an advantage to one side triggered a response from the other, "never enough to win, always enough to keep the war going."[9]

The following chapter, *Democracy's Chance*, returns to states like Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Morocco and even Libya, as they attempt a transition to democracy. We follow Tunisia's 2011 free elections, which saw the Qatari-backed Ennahda Movement win 37.04% of the votes and 89 seats in the Assembly. The Egyptian elections saw another Qatari network victorious in

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 91
[8] *Ibidem*, p. 117
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 130

the person of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi. Qatar was gaining ground in the regional struggle for power between the Gulf states.

The case of Egypt under Mohamed Morsi and the 2013 coup d'état against his regime are insisted upon. Lynch outlines a profile of Morsi's behavior and decisions that explain both the anxiety of Saudi Arabia (Morsi's visit to Tehran in September) and the growing dissatisfaction of Egyptian society (Morsi's constitutional declaration in November that granted him absolute presidential authority). The July 2013 coup put an end not only to his regime, but more broadly, to what the author calls a "primary positive American project."[10] Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the newly Gulf-backed leader, was initially symbolic of Qatar's decreasing regional power, but his win did not automatically translate to Saudi dependency. In fact, Sisi would not follow Saudi Arabia's position in Syria nor towards the war in Yemen.

The sixth chapter, *Autocrats on Offense*, discusses the American diplomatic opening towards Iran, Ennahda's electoral defeat to UAE's network in the 2014 Tunisian elections and the challenges in post-Qaddafi Libya.

Concerning the latter, Lynch considers the infamous Benghazi attack of September 2012 from a Libyan perspective, as opposed to the more common analysis of its significance to American politics. As such, Ansar al-Sharia's attack was possibly even more disastrous for the Libyans, since it exposed the limitations of the new state and its inability to establish control over society. The militias that rose up against the government during the uprising were now impossible to regulate or command, becoming an element of major instability. The Libyan transition was going downhill, and few had hope that it could fully recover from the path of uncertainty and danger it had started to tread on.

Chapter seven, *Syria in Hell*, takes a look at Syria's descent into its most catastrophic stage, when the militarization of the insurgency was no longer questioned but accepted as fact, Obama's "red line" approach was tested to its limits and the Islamic State emerged.

In the first few pages, the author also addresses Turkey's policy in Syria, "shaped by its prioritization of the Kurdish issue."[11] Turkey had been a major source of support for the Syrian rebels, training army defectors on its territory and hosting major opposition institutions, specifically the Syrian National Council and the core of the Free Syrian Army. However, Turkey had more interest in the Syrian conflict than just backing rebel

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 155
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 193

forces against Assad's government. The growing role and influence that Kurdish forces were gaining by fighting in the region was an essential factor in shaping Turkey's policy.

Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), as well as Syria's Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (PYD) became one of United States' most trusted allies on the ground in the fight against the Islamic State. This is an issue for Turkey, which has a long history of enmity towards its own Kurdish population; as Kurds – especially those in the autonomous region of the Iraqi Kurdistan – become more visible actors and move closer to independence, Turkey's fears of Kurdish nationalism prompts it to act on the offensive towards the same groups that the US views as key allies.

Another highlight of the chapter is that of the growth of the Islamic State amidst the Iraqi and Syrian insurgencies. As the author puts it, "by late 2014, no Islamist movement had the luxury of ignoring the IS movement any longer."[12] With the advancement in Raqqa, and Mosul a few months later, the Islamic State shifted the balance of power both within the insurgency towards the jihadists, and within the larger Islamist movement in general towards the violent approaches of ISIS, al-Qaeda and other factions. Initially, the peaceful change model advanced by successful uprisings in the Middle East (Tunisia, Egypt) seemed to signal the ending, or at least the weakening of al-Qaeda's ideological vision and any such calls to violent jihad. However, by late 2014, it became apparent that the context which allowed movements like ISIS to thrive was enough to render that progress inconsequential.

Chapter 8, *The Saudi Gambit* deals with the interconnectedness of the rising of the Islamic State, the US efforts of pushing for a nuclear deal with Iran and the new Saudi foreign policy under King Abdullah's successor.

The civil war in Yemen is, unsurprisingly, the principal illustration of Saudi Arabia's deeper involvement in the region. In September 2014, tensions between the Hadi government supporters and Houthis opponents (who sought to reinstate Saleh) peaked when the latter seized the capital city of Sanaa. The Houthis' territorial advance was an alarm signal for Riyadh, which had been heavily involved in the GCC transition plan and, most importantly, viewed Yemen as valuable in the regional struggle against Iran. However, "for the Saudi agenda to succeed, […] the Houthis needed to be stripped of their revolutionary identity and successfully framed as a Shi'ite movement backed by Iran."[13]

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 222
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 236

Nevertheless, as Lynch points out, the Saudi military intervention in Yemen exposed, at the same time, the insecurity felt by the Gulf states in relation to the Iran nuclear agreement. That the intervention was in great part the Saudis flexing their military muscles is no secret; Saudi pundit Nawaf Obeid is quoted as saying that "ever since the Obama administration embarked on its disastrous policy of rapprochement with Iran, Saudi Arabia has been working to establish a new defense posture whereby it can use its own military assets […] to defend its interests."[14]

The final chapter, titled *Where do we go from here?*, comprises the author's thoughts on the Arab Uprising's future prospects and America's role in the region. His conclusion on the Arab revolts is that they are by no means over – nor have they failed completely in their aspirations. But the underlying problems that drove the movements in 2011 in the first place and the resulting wars that have engulfed the region will prevent a return to any form of stability. An arena of proxy wars, state collapses and sectarianism has declared no clear winners for now (especially in Syria and Yemen) and the events which the author describes as "the new Arab wars" will continue to shape regional dynamics and politics for decades.

A final point of focus is Obama's foreign policy towards the region, which has been largely criticized and blamed for the worsening of the crises. Lynch, instead, defends the President's approach, highlighting his forcefulness and stubborness not to give in to pressures coming from Saudi Arabia, UAE and Israel on key issues. That Obama's strategy did not win is primarily due to the insufficient authority he held over the policies of said states to turn their own policies around, but that is something that goes beyond a single president. Indeed, Lynch predicted Donald Trump's first high level visits to Saudi Arabia and Israel in May 2017 as a „rush to repair these alliances,"[15] but warns that it will not be long before the deeper flaws that „went far beyond Obama"[16] will become clear to the new President.

In the end, Marc Lynch's *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* is a forceful meditation on the current assumptions regarding the Arab Spring – in part to re-energize the discussion on issues that have been long viewed locally rather than regionally, and to provide a deeper understanding of the region for future generations of policy-makers and/or advisors. Lynch succeeds in capturing the turbulent dynamics between

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 238
[15] *Ibidem*, p. 246
[16] *Ibidem*, pp. 246-47

various powers in the Middle East, their involvement and subsequent escalation of violence in struggles that began, primarily, inside the Arab societies. At the same time, he encourages a new understanding of America's limitations in the region during Obama's years as a consequence of strategy rigidity on the part of regional allies – a point of view especially worthy of consideration now as the US seeks to re-adjust its foreign policy under a new president, who may find, indeed, that the new Arab wars make it much harder to dictate the terms.