Islam and the Arab Awakening
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To Saliha and Zaid Shakir
To Fawzia and Yusuf Islam
To Ingeborg and Fred A. Reed
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Analysis in the heat of the action is never easy, especially as events unfold and their causes—and the future itself—remain clouded with uncertainty.

This book makes no claim to reveal secrets, to unveil what may be strategic goals, and even less to predict the future. To do so would be madness, a combination of presumption and vanity. It would also be futile. Today, as terms like “Arab Spring,” “revolutions,” and “upheavals” are thrown about to describe what has happened across the Middle East and North Africa, I seek only to reexamine the facts, study the realities, and suggest some lessons, not only for the Arab world and the Muslim majority countries, but also for observers of these startling and unexpected developments.

What really happened in Tunisia and in Egypt? What is happening in the broader region that makes up MENA (Middle East and North Africa)? Why now? These are the first questions that spring to mind. To answer them we must submit the recent past and the personalities involved to fresh scrutiny and evaluate the available political, geopolitical, and economic data. Only a holistic reading that encompasses these three dimensions can provide the keys needed for us to begin to understand what lies ahead. As huge shock waves shake the Arab countries, such an approach is essential if we are to make sense of the issues, if we are join hands with those societies in their march toward freedom, democracy, and economic autonomy.

As vital as it appears to give the Arab uprisings a name, we should be cautious about rushing to define them. Not knowing exactly what the components of these nonviolent, transnational mass movements are, we know even less about their eventual outcome. Like people around the world, I rejoiced at the fall of the dictators and their regimes. But after a close analysis of the facts and the objective data available, I prefer to take a position of cautious, lucid optimism. Recent history has by no means yielded all its secrets; the analysis I offer in this volume will most certainly have to be revised, refined, and perhaps challenged.
The uprisings that swept the Arab world did not come from nowhere. As early as 2003, as will soon become clear, there had been talk of democratization in the MENA zone. It had, in fact, become then-president George W. Bush’s key argument for intervention in Iraq. One year later, young MENA cyber-dissidents were signing up for training courses in nonviolent protest. Institutions funded by the American administration and/or major private firms organized lectures and seminars and set up networks that would provide training for young leaders who were given instruction in the use of the Internet and social networks. How deeply were Western governments involved? What did they know? What are we to make of the fact that the governments of Tunisia and Egypt arrested cyber-dissidents or subjected them to questioning on their return from training sessions abroad? These are facts that just won’t go away; they must be studied and put in context if we wish to gain a better understanding of the dynamics and issues involved.

Are we to conclude, as some believe, that the protest movements that emerged in 2010 were designed and manipulated from abroad; that ultimately, the “West,” the United States and Europe, control everything? I think not. There is a huge gap between determining what was known, monitored, and sometimes planned and concluding that history can be reduced to attempts to influence the course of events. Certainly it does seem clear that the United States and Europe had decided to change their policies in the two regions. Unconditional support for dictators could no longer be a viable or effective option, especially in the presence of emerging political and economic players such as China, India, Russia, and South Africa. Reform had become imperative. What could not be controlled, however, were the breadth of the phenomenon and the extent of the sacrifices the region’s peoples were prepared to make to assert their thirst for freedom.

The protest movements that erupted first in Tunisia, then in Egypt—the high-spirited tumult of Liberation Square (Midan at-Tahrir)—released forces and energy that no one could have anticipated. In countries as diverse as Yemen, Syria, Morocco, Bahrain, and Libya, women and men showed that although they could sometimes be manipulated, the mass movements they created could not be totally controlled. A barrier has been breached in the Arab world: a fact that must be acknowledged with lucidity, and without illusion. This means steering clear of both the idealism and the wide-eyed optimism of those who are blind to the behind-the-scenes maneuvers of the politicians and the conspiratorial paranoia of those who have lost their faith in the ability of human beings to assert themselves as the subjects of their own history. Such is my position throughout this study. The people of the Middle
East have proven that dictators can be overthrown without weapons, by sheer force of numbers, by a nonviolent, positive outlook. Taken together, these events tell us that something irreversible has occurred.

The moment is a historic one, as are the opportunities that will emerge as the era of dictatorships draws to an end. The outcome is unclear; the uprisings are not yet revolutions. From Tunisia to Yemen, by way of Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain, nothing can be taken for granted: democratic processes are only beginning to emerge; security is shaky while armies remain fully armed and on alert. No one can foretell the future: the tensions that followed the events in both Tunisia and Egypt show that more time will be needed before the past can be forgotten and open, pluralistic, democratic societies can emerge. But the key players involved in each society will have no choice but to face up to the real challenges and to avoid the trap of polarization, of sterile debate between “secularists” and “Islamists.” More than a few fundamental questions remain to be clarified: the nature of the state, the role of religion, the basic principle of equal rights for all citizens, equality of women and men, to name a few. But the debate cannot be reduced to a confrontation between two approaches, both of which are in crisis, as I will attempt to demonstrate in this book.

The task of construction that lies before intellectuals and politicians is to identify the key issues, to define and prioritize the ways and means for carrying out social and political reform, and to foster the rise of a true civil society, far removed from warped, paralyzing, and petty quarrels. As covetous glances, both geopolitical and economic, focus on the MENA zone, such is the radical and comprehensive process of renewal for which I call.

The time has come to stop blaming the West for the colonialism and imperialism of the past or for today’s attempts at manipulation and control. Arab and Muslim majority societies must jettison their historic posture as victims and reconcile themselves with the course of history that millions of women and men accelerated so massively by coming out into the streets. Their responsibility is a historic one: they must entertain no illusions about what is at stake, be wary of attempts at manipulation, and be determined to carry out essential reforms with the full participation of all citizens, women and men, from all social classes and religious and cultural backgrounds.

The uprisings have created a multiplicity of new perspectives. Choices must now be made. The timeworn “Islam versus the West” dichotomy is now giving way to multipolar relations, in which the Global South, the Islamic Orient, and Asia are assuming new and innovative roles. Though fascinating in itself, the new dynamic does not automatically guarantee more justice and
more democracy. The rise to prominence of China, Russia, and India obviously does not ensure respect for human rights and pluralism. Some people are quick—to too quick—to rejoice at the collapse of American power. The same people may be unaware that what might replace it (given China’s new predominance and the emergence of India and Russia) could well lead to a regression in social and human rights, and to new forms of dependency. These are issues of crucial importance that call for in-depth debate over which socio-political models are to be developed and what new economic relations should be established. They lie at the heart of this book’s overarching concern: as the Arab awakening unfolds, what role will religious references play? How should Islamic principles and ultimate goals be (re)thought? Can divergent aspirations for reform be unified, or must Muslim majority societies be restricted to the opposition between secular and Islamist ideologies? What is, today, the role of political Islam? Can Turkey be seen as a model? How are we to promote an autonomous civil state?

I will be addressing these issues, with particular emphasis on the prerogatives of civil society. In the closing section, I will analyze the ethical challenges that lie ahead and examine possible alternatives. Social and political questions, as well as those touching on the economy, on culture, and on relations with the West, will continue to be determinant and will require close examination in the light of cultural and religious references. I will suggest avenues of approach, all the while rejecting the twin temptations of oversimplification and polarization. For the Arab uprisings to flourish and to lead toward radical change that embodies real—and realistic—hopes, we will need all the intellectual effort, all the close, constructive criticism and emancipation from Western domination we can muster.

The final section of the book consists of a series of appendices bringing together articles I wrote published in European (including Turkish) and American newspapers, in the Arab press, and also on my website, as events unfolded.1 In them the reader will encounter a wide range of viewpoints at differing points in time, coupled with analyses that have not necessarily been developed in the first four chapters. The appendices thus form a useful and informative supplement, in the form of ongoing commentary, to the text.

The upheavals we are witnessing in the Middle East and North Africa confirm much of what I have long maintained, investigated, and repeated for several years. Readers familiar with my work on Muslim majority societies, on the presence of Muslims in the West, and on Islamic theological and legal references will be able to pinpoint the intuitions and propositions whose relevance has been confirmed by recent events. The same holds true for questions of democracy,
culture, art, shared values, and ultimate goals (in both the Islamic Orient and the West), but also for the critical importance of the experiences of Western Muslims. My recent thinking on applied ethics and on the crucial importance of overcoming binary thinking has not only been confirmed but has also gathered strength and energy as we act to seize the historic occasion that lies before us.

Seen in this light, the double emancipation—of the mind and of society—must be our primary goal. The Arab awakening must not succumb to self-alienation or be subverted by a new form of colonialism that would shatter the hopes of millions of women and men. There can be no turning back; now we must hope that the peoples of the region will find their way forward, in full freedom.
No one foresaw them; many wondered how to describe them. When public protests broke out in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010, interpretations of what had happened proliferated. The wares of a young street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, had been confiscated; in protest he had set himself on fire. Factors as diverse as poverty and economic hardship, unemployment, police repression, and authoritarian rule were advanced to explain his death.

The weeks that followed would bring dramatic change to the Middle East, North Africa, and the world. On January 14, 2011, the Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia. On February 27, after a month of confusion, a new government took office. Two months had changed the face of Tunisia. To shouts of “Get out!” directed at the despot, his family, and his regime, the people had bested the dictatorship.

Meanwhile, the world looked on in astonishment as events gathered momentum and intensity. Egyptians followed the Tunisians’ lead, beginning January 25, 2011; with massive mobilizations in the now-famous Liberation Square (Midan at-Tahrir) they in turn toppled President Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011. Things were moving fast now, very fast. In Algeria, attempts to mobilize fell short, while Morocco witnessed a series of substantial protests called for February 20, 2011 (giving rise to the February 20th Movement). Reform had suddenly placed itself on the political agenda.

Across the Middle East the domino effect gained speed. To contain the protests the king of Jordan dismissed his prime minister (February 1, 2011) with promises of social reform. The Libyan people took to the streets and despite fierce repression, a National Transitional Council was set up on February 15, 2011, touching off a full-scale civil war with heavy support from the West and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Mass protests began in Bahrain on February 14, 2011, and demonstrations even took
place in Saudi Arabia that March, where they were brutally repressed. The wave of protests engulfed Yemen beginning on January 27, a few weeks after two men had set themselves on fire following the Tunisian example. In Syria, sporadic demonstrations began on January 26, which turned into more organized uprisings on March 15, 2011, despite harsh repression and isolation due to virtually nonexistent media coverage and the indecision of the international community.

**Naming**

From December 2010 through March 2011 and on into the summer of 2011 and beyond, the mobilizations that had spread like wildfire across the Middle East and North Africa continued. The mass movements all shared common characteristics—protest against social and economic conditions, rejection of dictatorship, the fight against corruption—but each one has its own very specific features, which in turn require individual analysis.

The first challenge, then, is to name and to describe what has taken place, both at its inception and in the course of its rapid expansion: were we talking about revolutions, rebellions, popular protests, or perhaps intifadas—uprisings—as was initially suggested in Tunisia, invoking the Arabic term now linked to the Palestinian resistance? Was it an “Arab spring,” like the European revolutions of the recent past? Were they “Jasmine Revolutions,” “Dignity Revolutions,” or something else?

Definitions and interpretations differ widely, as if determined by the optimism of the observer. Some see recent events as the birth of a new era, as a radical turning point between past and future, and boldly speak of revolution. Others, more cautious, assert that “popular uprisings” are changing political arrangements in North Africa and the Middle East, though it is too early to say whether they will lead to a true renewal. Others see them as revolts or popular upheavals, unable thus far to bring about reforms that may or may not alter the political and economic power structure in the Arab world. Others, finally, are not convinced at all: the mass movements are controlled from abroad—had US President George W. Bush not proclaimed a democratization movement in the region?—and could only be a transition toward a new type of Western control and domination. Before us lies a broad spectrum of interpretations, ranging from a “springtime of the peoples” to a new expression of the “thinly disguised cynicism of the powerful.” How are we to understand all this? What name are we to give it?
On closer analysis, the term “revolution” seems unwarranted. Can we really define the upheavals that have shaken the Middle East and North Africa as revolutions, either in terms of a transformed political order or a shift in the economic balance of power? Have the popular movements run their course; have they achieved their objectives? Clearly they have not, and it is far too soon to say that they will. Still, the extreme position that sees the omniscient and pervasive hand of the Western powers behind the mass demonstrations appears to be equally unwarranted. From Tunisia to Syria through Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen, the Western allies have clearly played a part and have attempted to control or direct the course of events, but it is impossible that they actually planned the revolts from start to finish.

As against “unfinished revolutions” and conspiracy theories, I prefer to use the term “uprisings” to describe the common character of the mass movements that have shaken the Arab countries. In them, women and men of all religions and social backgrounds took to the streets, without violence and without attacking the West, to demand an end to dictatorship, economic corruption, and denial of respect to citizens. Based on the categories drawn up by Jean-Paul Sartre and still relevant today, uprising as a category can be situated halfway between revolution and revolt; once it is carried to its fullest extent and overthrows the existing system (both as political rule and economic structure) it can become revolution. On the other hand, if it is incomplete, if it is manipulated, or if it fails, it will have expressed the people’s aspirations but not concretized their hopes. To speak of “uprisings” is to convey cautious optimism and to affirm that the revolts we have witnessed are already established facts, while so far the idea of revolution remains but a hope in all the Arab countries—without exception.

Predictable, Unpredictable

In December 2010 and January 2011, a broad consensus emerged around the world that described the earliest upheavals as totally unpredictable and unexpected, largely because the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes had appeared so solid and unshakable. Moreover, as the European and American powers had supported these regimes for years, any fundamental political transformation seemed highly unlikely. Standing apart from the rest of the world, Arab societies for the past thirty years had been mired deeply in the status quo. Entrenched dictators headed harsh, unbending regimes that could at least be credited with preserving regional security and stability while mercilessly repressing “dangerous opponents,” “Islamists,” and/or “radicals.” Given this
state of affairs, no one could have foreseen the movements that erupted, no one could even have hoped for them: set phrases that journalists and analysts used again and again, as if to persuade the public that the immense crowds in the streets were unlike anything that had come before. For, as American president Barack Obama said, history unfolds through the political will of “people calling for change.” Or does it?

Any in-depth analysis of events in the region must move beyond the mass demonstrations for political reform to embrace two critical dimensions: the economic factors and the US call in 2003 for democratizing the Middle East. In both Tunisia and Egypt, the two countries where the protest movement first emerged, the primary cause of discontent and mobilization was economic. Simple analysis of the social and economic realities of both countries shows that all the components of a social explosion were present. While leaders were wallowing in luxury and corruption, the prices of basic foodstuffs had soared to intolerable levels in Tunisia, in Egypt, and even in Jordan while unemployment impacted ever-widening sections of the population. Those who had jobs were forced to survive on near-starvation wages and often to hold two or three jobs to make ends meet. The situation had become intolerable; everything pointed to imminent social explosion. Though no one could have predicted that the death of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia would trigger such a response to the cruel treatment inflicted on the population, the economic data did make it possible to place the meaning and the demands of the uprisings in perspective.

It should be added that the idea of “democratizing” the Middle East was, by then, hardly an original concept. It was first expressed in 2003, long before Barack Obama became president of the United States. Then-president George W. Bush explained that the war in Iraq constituted a first step toward a global democratic movement in the Greater Middle East and that Islam was by no means opposed to democracy. On November 6, 2003, he added that his involvement in the Middle East was akin to Ronald Reagan’s support for Eastern Europe’s struggle for democracy in the 1980s. American and European strategy in the region was due for an overhaul; their wishes were no secret. Successive US administrations had made it clear that for economic and political reasons, the region’s dictatorships had to change as a necessary precondition for opening up Arab markets and integrating the region into the global economy. Had these two factors not been taken into account, there was a strong likelihood that the justifications for supporting the status quo and backing the dictatorships—security and stability—would have produced the exact opposite, and would have led to a total loss of control of