

**Calfano, Brian Robert, ed. *Assessing MENA Political Reform, Post-Arab Spring: Mediators and Microfoundations*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014. viii + 205 pages. Hardcover, \$85.00.**

Arab Spring started with the self-emulation of a street vendor in Tunisia that rapidly spread through North Africa, metastasized to the Middle East, and settled in Syria and its ongoing civil war. The editor, a political scientist, stated that the goal of the book was “not to offer a basic rehashing of entrenched arguments about democratization, import substitutions, the rentier curse, and other familiar MENA (Middle East Northern Africa) topics. Instead we provide what are more aptly considered a series of chapter vignettes focusing on the events pre- and post-Spring and how certain mediating variables might affect future reform prospects” (p. viii).

Using a plethora of literature to build their arguments, the contributing authors explain the unique attributes of the region and other events that many Western observers see as contributing to Arab Spring and the basics of MENA society. They discuss a variety of topics, including: (a) the difficult, but not impossible, task of predicting events in such a dynamic and ever-changing area of the world (Walt, 2015); (b) the impact of new technology – i.e. social media – in political activism; and (c) the challenges of young, inexperienced political groups maneuvering to replace established political bureaucracies that have endured revolutions, dictators, and religious turmoil.

With respect to other mediating variables that may affect future reform, the chapter called “Islam and Interpretive Ingenuities” is of special interest. In agreement with some other contributing authors, ‘Islamic Fundamentalism or Islamism’ is seen as a major determinant and predictor of political action in MENA. It is explained that dissecting Islam using terms and divisions from other non-Muslim religions, for example, U.S. Christian Fundamentalism, is not appropriate when researching or investigating events in MENA. The authors conclude that “Islam is a powerful predictor of political and economic life in MENA, although when, where, how, and why an influence attributable to Islam manifest will depend on the nature of the question and the investigation addressed” (p. 58).

At a time when events in the MENA region change on an almost daily basis, this book will help the reader or researcher to understand the impact of Arab Spring on continuing events in MENA, including the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The research used by the authors is well presented and documented. The writers have used a variety of sources including social and political theory, as well as public opinion polls and surveys to present quantitatively the opinions of the people. As Calfano explains, each chapter also offers a springboard for additional study. The diversity of the population discussed is representative of the region; however, one limitation that the authors cite is the lack of data representing all of the nations and all possible scenarios in MENA.

The book closes with the following statement: “clearly there is a promise in the prospects of political reform in this post-Arab Spring period...[and] better understanding of these prospects requires a focus on the mediating factors that will provide the glimpse into the MENA’s political future” (p. 205). This book is a necessary read for the Middle East political observer especially as so many questions remain on the table from the ongoing wars and negotiations, the Iran nuclear issues, and the Israel-Palestine problem. Sadly, the story is still playing out, and whether Arab Spring will be written into the history books as a success or failure is yet to be seen.

David A. Mattingly, Ph.D.  
National Security Consultant  
American Military University  
Leesburg, Virginia