

# The Arab street revisited

Petra Stienen reviews seven books that explore the nature of change in the Arab world in recent years. What role have young people, journalists and new technologies played in this process, and what effect will they have on post-revolutionary societies there?

For a long time, the proverbial ‘Arab street’ – a symbol for public opinion in the Middle East – did not live up to the expectations of Western observers. It was either considered too passive and apathetic, or too irrational and aggressive. In any case, the voices in the streets of Arab cities were not taken to reflect public opinion in the Arab world. This ambivalent view of the Arab street dovetailed perfectly with the idea of ‘Middle Eastern Exceptionalism’, which argues that change can only come from the outside and not from the inside.

This attitude gave Western powers the excuse to persist with the myth that it was better to support pro-Western dictators than be confronted with – what was considered the only alternative – the chaos of an Islamic revolution. Especially since 9/11, dictatorships in the region have played on the enormous fear of more terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists, and increased the belief in Washington and European capitals that they needed the leaders such as Hosni Mubarak in the fight against terrorism. In the meantime, the democratic deficit in the Arab world was generally blamed on the inherent anti-democratic nature of Islam and not on the corrupt nature of the regimes kept in power by the West.

## Taking to the streets

The millions of people who took to the streets of Tunis, Tripoli, Benghazi, Cairo, Damascus, Manama and Sanaa in the spring of 2011 showed that the Arab street is much more politicized than many politicians, policy makers and journalists in Europe and the US have wanted to acknowledge. And to the surprise of many inside and outside the region, the people in those streets showed that the call for change definitely came from within.

While policy makers, journalists and academics in Washington, Brussels and other European capitals are doing overtime writing new analyses for the future of the Arab region, it is useful to pause and look at a number of books

- *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, by Asef Bayat, Stanford University Press, 2010, 320 pp.
- *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, ed. by Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat, Oxford University Press, 2010, 448 pp.
- *The Media Relations Department of Hizbollah Wishes You a Happy Birthday: Unexpected Encounters in the Changing Middle East*, by Neil MacFarquhar, PublicAffairs, 2009, 388 pp.
- *Meccanomic\$: The March of the New Muslim Middle Class*, by Vali Nasr, Oneworld, 2010, 320 pp.
- *The New Arab Journalist: Mission and Identity in a Time of Turmoil*, Lawrence Pintak, I.B. Tauris, 2010, 304 pp.
- *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern and Everyday*, Tarik Sabry, I.B. Tauris, 2010, 240 pp.
- *What's Really Wrong with the Middle East*, Brian Whitaker, Saqi Books, 2009, 304 pp.

that were released just before the start of the Arab awakening in 2011. Each of them has the quality of foresight, which is still useful for explaining why millions of people took to the Arab streets to make their voices heard.

Concerns about the political, social and economic situation in the whole Arab region are still legitimate, of course, but these stories so prevalent in Western media and academia do not give the complete picture. There are other stories that need to be told, ones that have somehow never received much traction in Europe and the United States. Neil MacFarquhar tells such a story. He grew up as an expat child in Libya and came back to the region as a correspondent for *The New York Times*. His 2009 travelogue, *The Media Relations Department of Hizbollah Wishes You a Happy Birthday: Unexpected Encounters in the Changing Middle East*, is a perfect introduction for a general readership to other stories from the region.

The amusing title of this book alludes to the custom of Hezbollah’s media department to send foreign journalists a birthday card. His choice of title shows that modernity and media savvy have not only reached groups the West would like to support, such as young people using Facebook and Twitter. Indeed, the real strength of his book is that he introduces the reader to alternative voices, such as the voices

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Paul Hackett / Reuters

Young men in Green Square, Tripoli, Libya

of people in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria and Kuwait who struggle, at times at great risk to their own lives, to combine their own culture and religion with the temptations and challenges of modern times.

MacFarquhar's encounter with Fawzia Abu Bakr, a professor of education shows that rebellion comes at a price. She was one of the 47 women who participated in 1990 in a driving demonstration demanding the lifting of the ban on women driving. To this day, she has been denied promotion. In his chapter on Syria, he shows with understated distance how the few opposition figures, such as the human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, are trying to build a vibrant civil society, but very often end up in jail because they are 'disseminating false information likely to undermine the morale of the nation in wartime'. MacFarquhar concludes his book with a plea to give people in the Arab region what they are entitled to: reform from within, rather than reform with conditions imposed from the outside.

Of course, this is a major challenge for the European Union and the United States: will they ever heed Edward Said's warning in his 1978 work *Orientalism* that the West's view of the Arab region is dominated by preconceived notions? Will they really listen to the voices in the many Arab streets without imposing solutions that cater to their own

interests, rather than the interests of the people who have lived for decades under harsh dictatorships? If they can offer solutions that bear the interests of the Arab people in mind, they must develop inside knowledge of the Arab region, which will take time and effort.

### **New media landscape**

One way to achieve this is to take a closer look at modern Arab media. Whereas MacFarquhar only touches on the role of the media in one chapter on Al-Jazeera, Lawrence Pintak focuses on the role of journalists and the media throughout his 2011 book, *The New Arab Journalist: Mission and Identity in a Time of Turmoil*.

For those who studied Arabic and the Arab world before 1990, Arabic media were not the means for discovering what was happening in the Arab street. They only printed the official party line. They were not allowed to write or talk about rulers, religious issues or sexuality. Successful journalists were literally on the payroll of people close to or inside the regime.

Pintak gives a good overview of how this has changed over the past decade and how Arab journalists have reassessed their own roles. Nowadays, channels such as Al-Jazeera, MBC and Al Arabiya are shaping the views and attitudes of



the whole world about the Arab region and its people. They also feed on the enormous hunger of people in the region for real news, who often gather information by collecting bits and pieces of it from TV channels, newspapers and lately blogs, Twitter and other forms of citizen journalism.

Pintak acknowledges TV's key role as an agent of change, or more specifically as a tool used by the architects of change. It has now become clear that during the Arab Spring TV was the most important tool for people to follow the on-going revolutions (only a small percentage of the population had access to Facebook and Twitter).

The Arab media has definitely given a voice to the groups Asef Bayat focuses on in his 2010 book, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Bayat introduces two important concepts that show the role 'normal people' play in the Arab world today: social non-movements and the art of presence.

To Bayat, these concepts encapsulate the powerful mobilization of millions of poor, urban Muslim women and young people, who quietly imposed themselves through sheer presence. The author comes back throughout the course of the book to what he calls 'the quiet encroachment of the ordinary ... the discreet and prolonged ways in which the poor struggle to survive and to better their lives by quietly impinging on the propertied and powerful, and on society at large.'

Bayat shows convincingly that it is exactly these groups who have transformed the Arab street into a Political street over the past decades, a change which went unnoticed by many foreign observers until the spring of 2011. Of course, the question remains what role Islam will play for people in the region in their political choices. Bayat identifies a trend in his book, which he calls 'post-Islamist'. To him this trend is 'neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic or secular. Growing out

of anomalies of Islamist policies since the early 1990s, post-Islamism represents an endeavour to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty'.

### **Bridging the modern and traditional**

Tarik Sabry underlines the importance of the ordinary in looking at politics in the Arab world in his 2010 book *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern and Everyday*. Although his book is less accessible than Bayat's, its focus on cultural encounters forces the reader to look beyond the idea that everyday life is mundane and therefore apolitical.

His book explores what it means to be modern in the Arab world by looking at popular culture in the region and asks whether one can be modern and traditional at the same time. For him the Qasr al-Nil Bridge is a case in point of how people deal with the question of modernity in their daily lives. He describes this bridge leading to Tahrir Square in Cairo as a 'working class cultural space' and a 'symbolic manifestation of the socio-economic and cultural change in Egypt'.

In July 2011, I crossed that bridge with one of the young Egyptian activists. Normality had returned to the bridge and young couples were flirting and enjoying each other's company and the view of the Nile. But for the activist, the Qasr al-Nil Bridge has changed forever after being part of an important battleground for freedom and dignity when he and his colleagues were fighting the Egyptian regime in the early days of the revolution.

The cover of *Being Young and Muslim*, a collection of essays published in 2010 and edited by Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat, shows a picture of young people taking a walk through Al-Azhar Park, near 'Islamic Cairo'. The park is one of the few public spaces where young people can have fun, and enjoy themselves within the boundaries of more clearly described regulations on decency at the entrance of the park. The cover shows how young Muslims are trying to simultaneously reconcile their youthfulness and their Muslim heritage. The editors of this book indicate that fulfilling these young people's longing for normality is anything but straightforward in the Arab world.

Unemployment statistics for the young generation – which are above 25% in the Arab region according to official figures – clearly show that 'for an average middle class youngster, not having a job means little income, slight chance of having independent accommodation, and low chance of marriage – in sum no meaningful autonomous life'. In fact, the demands of the demonstrators in the streets of the various Arab capitals were not exceptional at all, but in line with the grievances of many dispossessed groups and young people all over the South.

The words on their banners and in their YouTube clips during the Arab Spring were clear: they wanted jobs, they wanted to marry and above all they wanted dignity. But all of these normal demands were out of reach because graduates found there were no jobs for them, and widespread corruption enriched the few and excluded many. And





Young women in Algiers, Algeria

remarkably for some, with a few exceptions the vast majority of the millions of demonstrators in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria did not call for the destruction of the West or Israel, or for the establishment of a new Islamic Caliphate.

Of course, there has to be a more open attitude to the voices in the Arab streets if there is to be genuine change from within. But the major challenge is whether the mentality of people in Arab countries will change in their dealings with each other. Indeed, the wall of fear erected by decades of authoritarian politics may have been torn down by the demonstrations and protests, but there still exists a wall of fear regarding the expression of personal liberties.

### **Personal liberties, democratic ambitions**

Brian Whitaker, a *Guardian* journalist with extensive experience in the Arab world, asks pressing questions about personal liberties in his 2010 book *What's Really Wrong with the Middle East*. He focuses for a large part on the failing education system. To him, this is exactly the place where young people are confronted with a mixture of paternalism (at home and among teachers), authoritarianism (the state) and dogmatism (religion). He raises concerns that it will be difficult in the coming years for young people to break through this cycle and its consequences because they live in societies where there is little leeway for critical thought, creativity and active citizenship.

Vali Nasr is less concerned about these issues in his *Meccanomic\$: The March of the New Muslim Middle Class (2009)*. He argues that if Western governments want to contribute to changing and modernizing the Middle East, they should really concentrate on the democratic ambitions of the rising middle classes. His enthusiastic call in the first part of his book to pay more attention to the economics of a rising Muslim Middle class is a real eye-opener.

This class's voice will not be shaped as much by religion as by the opportunities they will have to assert their economic rights as entrepreneurs, professionals and consumers. Nasr adheres to the idea that while commerce might not breed secularism, it will encourage moderation. He expresses great admiration throughout the book for Turkey, which he feels has created a sustainable balance between Islam and modernity.

In the coming months, the world will witness preparations for elections in Tunisia and Egypt. While events in other countries such as Libya and Syria, have not yet led to elections being put on the agenda, these countries are certainly undergoing transformations and transitions. It remains to be seen whether the calls in the Arab streets for dignity, an end to corruption and more jobs will result in sustainable and successful political solutions. One thing is certain: the new leaders in the Arab region, as well as Western policy makers, can no longer ignore the legitimacy of the voices in the Arab street, nor the calls of citizens who want to be heard and taken seriously. ■