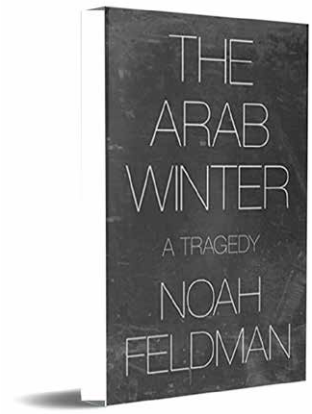

An Arab Spring only in Tunisia—Elsewhere, an Arab Winter

The Arab Winter: A Tragedy
by Noah Feldman
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192 pages

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It is easier to say what Noah Feldman's newest book is not, than to describe what it is. It is not a comparative study on what is called the Arab Spring, which surveys the historical, political, socioeconomic, and demographic background of the Arab states as the backdrop to the events of the past decade. Nor is it a panoramic look at all the states in the region. The author, a professor of law at Harvard University, chooses to examine only a few countries in the Arab world—Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Iraq—and the Islamic State of ISIS, which extended over parts of the territory of the latter two. Yet even this perspective, which ignores the Arab Spring in all the Arab monarchies, offers an important if narrow prism to the question, to what extent did the events and their results reflect the "will of the people."

The book begins with an introduction that in effect summarizes the author's conclusions that political action requires the acquisition of power, and this, he argues, was not achieved by the masses that went out to demonstrate. In the first chapter, Feldman discusses the Arab nature of the uprising and attempts to define what the people wanted. In the second chapter, he offers an analysis of the first wave of demonstrations in Egypt, which he calls "Tahrir 1," and posits his conceptual theory regarding those participating in the protest as the "agents" of the rest the Egyptian people. The third chapter, on Syria, expounds on the helplessness of the Obama administration. In the fourth chapter, Feldman examines the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as a utopia, while also relating critically to the George W. Bush administration and the results of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The final chapter is devoted to Tunisia, which Feldman sees as the protest movement's only success in the Arab world.

The book's central argument is that it was not only the poor economic situation and the gross violation of the social contract, which in any case was nonexistent, that brought the masses to the streets. The primary reason for the protests, in Feldman's view, was the lack of legitimate government, normatively speaking, compounded by the regimes' lack of success in providing proper living conditions, dignity, and social justice (pp. 22-24). The author adds that the protest movements did not oppose democracy, but its absence was not deemed the root of the problem in the states and regimes of late 2010 and early 2011.

Early in the book, Feldman touches on a central issue that goes beyond the Arab and Middle East realm. While protest movements that declared the aim of regime change achieved this change, in many cases in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, the transition was from one autocratic regime to another. Feldman himself raises the dilemma when he asks: if regime change was what the people desired, did another form of autocratic regime also reflect its will? With remarkable intellectual honesty, he reaches the conclusion, though it is difficult for him to accept it, that this indeed is the case—even the return to autocratic rule, like what existed in the past and ensured stability, reflects the will of the people (pp. 25; 74-76).

The most prominent case, to which Feldman dedicates the central chapter in his book, is Egypt. The January 25, 2011 uprising was, in his view, an expression of the popular will. The masses that went out into the streets wanted change. There was no precise definition of the essence of the change, but the intensity of the demonstrations, the fact that the army stood aside, and the US administration's response with respect to President Mubarak brought about the end of his rule. Feldman relates positively to the process that led to the election of Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood representative, as President of Egypt in 2012. His analysis of the Egyptian military leadership's relations with President Morsi is interesting, but does not add to the academic literature or journalistic coverage of the issue. Feldman attributes Morsi's removal to a series of mistakes by the President, led by his ignoring the elements that he overcame by a small margin in the presidential elections, contrary to the advice he received from the Tunisian political party Ennahda, identified with the Muslim Brotherhood, which compromised on principles and was willing to share power (pp. 52-56).

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But Morsi was democratically elected, and Feldman—who deals less with the low voter turnout and its implications for the popular will and more with the events of "Tahrir 2," that is, the June 30, 2013 demonstrations—concludes that the army's return to a blatantly autocratic government expressed the will of the demonstrators, who expressed the will of the people. That is, even though the Tahrir 2 demonstrators wanted the removal of a democratically elected president, their demonstration was democratic and legitimate, as were the Tahrir 1 demonstrations in January 2011 (pp. 73-75).

This is in effect the core of Feldman's book and the reason for his obvious disappointment with the results of the Arab Spring, which apparently prompted the title *The Arab Winter*. His disappointment stems from the willingness of Arab liberals, especially Egyptians, to betray the principles of constitutional democracy, knowing that in doing so they were returning the army to power. In Russia and Eastern Europe this occurred gradually over the course of more than 20 years. In Egypt, the transition from semi-autocratic government to semi-democratic government and back occurred within two years. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi deserves criticism, in Feldman's view, but it cannot be said that he does not reflect the popular will (pp. 73-75).

The dilemma that Feldman addresses does not remain in the purely intellectual realm. It accompanies the leaders of the European Union when they decide EU policy in light of the results of elections in member states that bring to power populist movements bordering on fascism and ultra-nationalism, and Erdogan in Turkey and el-Sisi in Egypt. The return of a Democratic president to the White House augurs a complex dialogue between Washington and certain capitals in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and East Asia on issues such as human rights and freedoms, minority rights, and the rule of law.

The United State policy in the Middle East and especially its approach to aspects of the Arab Spring receive considerable attention in the book, which has particularly sharp criticism for the Obama administration. The main argument is that while it is true that the poor balance sheet of Obama's predecessors in the Middle East constituted a negative incentive, this does not justify the lack of response to Assad's use of chemical weapons to suppress the civil rebellion and the refusal to provide a no-fly zone to the Sunnis (pp. 89-95). Feldman properly diagnoses the American dilemma that stems

from the desire to aid forces that seek to change anti-democratic regimes, but without taking responsibility for the results. Such a dilemma emerged following the colossal American mistake of invading Iraq in 2003 and collapsing the governmental infrastructure there (p. 89), but the author does not offer an answer or a formula that allows the United States effective intervention that does not necessarily incur responsibility, such as acting in a multinational framework and with international approval. The new US administration will also need to address this issue, if it indeed seeks to implement its values-based policy.

As part of his criticism of the policy of the Bush and Obama administrations, Feldman notes that the weakness of the regime in Iraq allowed the initial consolidation of the Nusra Front, from which the Islamic State was born, first in Iraq and later in Syria. Exploiting its success in Syria, this group sent forces to Iraq that allowed it to run a state, albeit for a short time, in the area on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border (pp. 103-106).

Feldman, with strong intellectual integrity, contends—while recognizing the difficult nature of the argument—that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria reflected the will of the movement's leaders and the will of those who joined it. He sees it as part of the events that unfolded following the Arab Spring and the desire of different groups to express themselves (p. xix). He arrives at a provocative conclusion: "While the Tahrir 2 revolution returned us from democracy to autocracy, the revolution in the case of the Islamic State returned us from the stage of self-determination (albeit terrible) to imperialist oppression [by imperialist oppression, Feldman means the struggle waged by the coalition forces against ISIS until its elimination: O.E.] and to the autocratic status quo of Assad's rule" (p. 124).

Feldman's composition is original and challenging, even if it does not contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon, the process, and the results of what is known as the Arab Spring. Some of his observations, such as those related to United States actions in the region, in particular toward autocratic regimes, should be studied by the new US administration vis-à-vis its approach to the Middle East. In this way it may be possible to avoid some of the mistakes of previous administrations.

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