Remembering Our Roots

NATHAN J. BROWN
Institute for Middle East Studies, George Washington University, Washington, D.C.; e-mail: nbrown@gwu.edu
doi:10.1017/S0020743811000481

Scholars of the Middle East based in social science disciplines—especially my own, political science—are likely to feel a bit more welcome by their colleagues as a result of recent events in the Middle East. Not only will we be informative conversationalists in the hallways for a while because of our regional expertise, but also, far more profoundly, the sorts of things that political scientists study, from voting patterns to regime change, are suddenly interesting subjects in the region. This is not to say that Middle East elections were not studied in the past or that research on political change was not undertaken—far from it. But the questions posed, the terms used, and tools employed were often different from those more prevalent in the discipline. Political scientists focusing on the Middle East are therefore likely to find this a gratifying time, ripe with opportunities for comparative and cross-regional analysis. And those nonregional specialists whose interests lie in a wide variety of topics from voting behavior to revolutions may work harder to incorporate Middle Eastern cases into their own work.

But as welcome as they may come to feel, scholars of Middle East politics oriented to the broader discipline of political science should not forget how much of regional politics they had missed or overlooked in recent years. The extent of political discontent, the attempt of protest movements to organize large constituencies, the authoritarian nature of regional regimes—all this was well known and thoroughly explored. But the rapidity with which the protests spread, the populations that were rapidly mobilized, the language and terms of the protests, the reactions of various political forces—all this came as a surprise to most specialists (just as it was to many opposition leaders and top officials). There is much ground to explore here that will require more intensive efforts to understand the societies of the region. This is not an argument for Middle Eastern particularism. On the contrary. But it is a call for continuing receptivity to the multidisciplinary insights that an area studies framework can provide. It has always been the case that research on the region (and even comparative work with other regions) has been deeply enriched by cultural, historical, and linguistic understandings and approaches. This is hardly the time to forget that truth.

Liberation Meets the State

DIANE SINGERMAN
Department of Government, School of Public Affairs, American University, Washington, D.C.; e-mail: dsinger@american.edu
doi:10.1017/S0020743811000493

Watching the uprisings unfold in the Middle East, as well as the opposition to them, leads me to appreciate the insights of social movement theory, which suggests that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743811000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press