Response to Howard and Walters

Marc Lynch

Political scientists did fail to predict the precise timing and nature of the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. They, however, did not miss the realities of rising social discontent, institutional degradation, economic struggles, and political stalemates. The literature generally concluded that authoritarian Arab regimes had proven their ability to survive such challenges, and retained sufficient capabilities and strategies to overcome their potential challengers. The survival of most Arab regimes in the face of protests and the resurgence of the old regime in Egypt suggest the continuing relevance of attention to the power of these authoritarian structures. There are a wide range of vital new research questions currently being explored, such as the intensity and rapid diffusion of protest across borders, the variation in the political choices by militaries, the distinctive resilience of monarchies, and the post-uprising struggles to consolidate new institutional orders. Overall, however, the response of Middle East specialists in political science should be viewed as a success story rather than a failure.

Explaining the Unexpected" argues that Middle East specialists might not have been expected to predict the uprisings of 2011, but should have been more open to the significance of political changes from below. I am inclined to be sympathetic to this line of argument, and fully agree that it is wrong to treat those "utterly remarkable waves of mass mobilization as politically inconsequential" (p. 399) because of their failure to quickly produce institutionalized democracy. The intensity and magnitude of the nearly simultaneous, synchronized mobilization across virtually every country in the MENA region deserves sustained analysis on its own merits. The article's diagnosis of the field's failings, and prescription for how it might in the future do better, are less compelling, however. And I fear that the authors might well risk replicating rather than curing the pathologies they decry.

Howard and Walters argue that Middle East specialists have been too focused on procedural democracy as the only alternative to a generic authoritarianism, and this myopic focus has systematically blinded them to the diversity of meaningful politics which lay beneath the surface of contention. They are certainly correct that the subfield by the late 2000s had become dominated by studies detailing the practices and the persistence of authoritarianism. Yet it is difficult to see how that literature could be read as reducing authoritarianism to an undifferentiated monolith. Many of these studies focused precisely on the multiple, diverse strategies and institutions that went into sustaining undemocratic forms of governance.[1] All of the attention to the varieties of authoritarianism and the mechanisms of regime maintenance for which the article pleads were in fact the bread and butter of the literature.

Nor does it make sense to bemoan the marginalization of interpretive research and "lines of inquiry about social and political conflict" (p. 400) by the mandarins of the field. Lisa Wedeen's interpretive studies of political symbolism in Syria and local public spheres in Yemen were among the most widely-cited Middle East political science texts of the last two decades.[2] So were Ellen Lust's book on the structuring of formal democratic practice;[3] Asef Bayat's books on "non-movements" and street politics;[4] Amaney Jamal's work on civil society's role in sustaining autocracy;[5] Nathan Brown's, Carrie Rosefsky Wickham's, and Jillian Schwedler's work on Islamist political parties;[6] Diane Singerman's political ethnography of Egyptian neighborhoods;[7] and (for that matter) my own work on Arab media and political communication.[8] Far more could always be done, of course, but this is an odd form of "disciplinary pressure within political science" (p. 394).

These problems point towards the need to more carefully specify how, exactly, the field failed in 2011. It would be wrong to claim that the field failed to anticipate or to observe popular mobilization. Few scholars studying Egypt in the 2000s could have been (or were) oblivious to the outbreak of protests, strikes, and defiance across the political spectrum. The social impact of neoliberal economic reforms and the growing struggles of Arab populations to meet basic needs was a theme that ran through the literature. The more accurate charge is that scholars overestimated the ability of regimes to withstand the pressure, a remarkable resilience which in fact drove the "authoritarian resilience" research agenda in the preceding years. But why

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did they make this mistake? Perhaps because after spending much of the 1990s and early 2000s writing about nonexistent democratic transitions and civil society, as Lisa Anderson (2006) ruthlessly pointed out, they "learned" precisely the sort of lesson which the "Explaining the Unexpected" of its day would have advised.[9]

"Explaining the Unexpected" presents something of a schizophrenic face. The formal structure of the article represents a potent model of cross-regional and cross-temporal comparative analysis. The comparison between the Sovietologists of 1989 and the Middle East Studies of 2011 is illuminating and productive. It is puzzling then, that for the Middle East the conclusion is that the field should move towards closer or deeper micro-studies of mobilization or public culture. While I would fully endorse all efforts to produce empirically rich, close study of specific countries and cases, it is not at all clear that such research was lacking prior to 2011 or that more of it would have substantially changed the field's predictive power.

Indeed, an equally strong—or stronger—case could be made instead for more comparative research *across regions*. The exceptional region-wide intensity of the mobilization, and the subsequent fragmentation and political frustrations, point towards broadly comparative rather than towards more case-intensive research questions. It is telling that, as the authors acknowledge, political scientists were joined in their failure to anticipate January 2011 by scholars from other disciplines, Western intelligence agencies, and the activists themselves. Perhaps Middle East specialists would have been better prepared for the Arab uprisings had they been paying attention to the protests sweeping sub-Saharan Africa in the previous years. More attention not only to 1989 but to the post-Soviet Color Revolutions in the mid-2000s and the 1990s African democratization wave might have offered a more useful perspective than more close studies of Tunisian neighborhoods.

The response to the Arab uprisings of 2011 suggests that the subfield is actually healthier than it has ever been. The previous decade's research offered solid foundations for understanding both the strength and limitations of Arab authoritarianism and accurately anticipated the struggles that protest movements would face after the protest wave passed its peak. Over the last three years, political scientists have shed important light on the role of Arab militaries, trends in public opinion, the importance of social media, the performance of Islamist movements and parties, and the diffusion of protest—and early in 2011, provided accurate early warning of the likely frustrations which the uprisings would soon face.[10] In a decade or two, when the scholars struggling with the next unanticipated crisis look for perspective, they may well take the methodologically diverse, empirically grounded, and analytically engaged performance of the Middle East political science subfield as a model rather than as a cautionary tale.

Notes

1 Posusney and Angrist 2005, Lust-Okar 2005.
2 Wedeen 1999, 2008.
3 Lust-Okar 2005.
4 Bayat 2006.
5 Jamal 2007.
6 Brown 2012, Wickham 2001, Schwedler 2006.
7 Singerman 1996.
8 Lynch 2006, 2012.
9 Anderson 2006.
10 Lynch 2014.

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