Response to Howard and Walters

Ellen Lust

This response points to three critical problems in *Explaining the Unexpected*. First, the authors' contention that scholars ignored "everyday contestation," including changing citizen-state relations, emerging venues of political participation, and the potential for mobilization, is based on a selective reading of the literature on politics in the Arab world before 2011. Second, their assertion that existing paradigms hindered scholars' ability to understand change mischaracterizes the literature on enduring authoritarianism. Scholars did not argue that regime breakdown was *impossible* before 2011 but rather sought to understand why authoritarian regimes were sustained. Long before the uprisings, they recognized the factors that could make breakdown possible. Third, Howard and Walters' conclusion that Middle East scholars' fundamental paradigms and their focus on regime type will lead them to treat "utterly remarkable waves of mass mobilization as politically inconsequential" is misplaced. The literature has and continues to explore a wide range of issues that extend far beyond democratization, and recent scholarship has examined varied aspects of the diverse political processes and outcomes witnessed since 2011. *Explaining the Unexpected* misses the mark on many points, but it does provide a useful platform for scholars to reflect on problems facing comparative politics. These include the blinders resulting from the normative biases underpinning the discipline and the need for a nuanced discussion about how, and to what extent, scholars facing rapid, regional transformations can learn from the study of similar experiences in other regions.

In *Explaining the Unexpected*, Howard and Walters counsel scholars focused on the Arab world not to repeat the mistakes Sovietologists made after 1989. They argue that Sovietologists were hamstrung by theories of modernization that not only failed to explain the rapid fall of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, but also hindered efforts to understand "the roots and character of popular mobilization" (p. 397). Today, they contend, scholars focusing on the Arab world are similarly stifled by their attention to regime change, and thus risk overlooking "relevant and important objects of study" (p. 398). Their concerns are well taken, but their argument fails on three important points.

First, they mischaracterize the literature on politics in the Arab world before 2011. Howard and Walters argue that most scholars studying the Middle East ignored "everyday forms of political contestation" (p. 398) and claim that those who did so constituted a small, marginalized community. Yet, 87 scholars from the US, Europe, and Middle East—many tenured at leading institutions—produced the work that Howard and Walters cite, in the two sentences they accord it. A closer look at the work by these scholars would find that it had much to say about changing citizen-state relations, emerging venues of political participation, and the potential for mobilization.[1] Moreover, much of the literature that Howard and Walters portray as centered on questions of regime change and democratization more accurately fits within what Holger Albrecht correctly called "the growing body of literature that takes authoritarianism in the Middle East *as is,* and not as something that could, or should, be something else."[2] For example, many studies of electoral politics or political parties were primarily aimed at understanding how such institutions structured citizens' engagement under authoritarianism. That this work often addressed the question of "why not democracy?" reflected the fact that, in the 1990s and 2000s, students focused on other regions (often intrigued by their own experiences of regime change and democratization) had little interest in contestation under authoritarian regimes.

Second, Howard and Walters wrongly assert that existing paradigms hindered scholars' ability to understand change. Scholars focusing on enduring authoritarianism examined structural conditions and political strategies that helped incumbents resist change, but they did not argue that regime breakdown was impossible. Indeed, long before the uprisings many scholars, myself included, pointed out how such factors as diminishing state resources, declining fear of Islamists, and succession crises could potentially destabilize regimes, creating possibilities for regime change and even democratization.[3] And, of course, those examining social and political movements were well aware of fissures that threatened

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seismic change.[4] The reason that many scholars failed to see these "now well-known factors as decisive before the fact" (p. 399) was not because the paradigms employed left them unprepared to do so but rather because they often failed to update expectations in the face of gradual change and, not surprisingly, were unable to predict rare, probabilistic events.

Third, Howard and Walters incorrectly contend that the paradigms employed before 2011 will hamper scholars' inquiry and lead them to "[treat] utterly remarkable waves of mass mobilization as politically inconsequential" (p. 399). Studies focusing on structural conditions, institutions, and political behavior within authoritarian regimes remain relevant today. Indeed, the authors concur, noting that, "scholarship on phenomena such as electoral manipulation and other aspects of state-managed politics are still highly relevant" (p. 398). Moreover, as was the case before 2011, much research is engaged in other inquiry. Only about 4 percent of political science-oriented papers presented at the Middle East Studies Association Annual Meetings in 2012 and 2013 focused on democratization and regime transition, while 9 percent examined mobilization, including cases in which regime change has not occurred.[5] The vast majority focused on a wide range of other issues (e.g., gender, identity, local politics, welfare provision, and violence.)

Howard and Walters mischaracterize scholarship of the Arab world before and after 2011 and present misleading conclusions, but they nicely illustrate problems commonly found in comparative politics. First, they critique but also reproduce the field's normative biases toward democracy. They show just how easy it is for the discipline to overlook scholarship focused on other questions and also illustrate the related mistake of conflating regime breakdown, transition, and democracy, slipping easily between these concepts both as they discuss the theoretical literature in the field and set forth their research agenda. Second, they reflect the field's interest in applying lessons learned from other regions, at times simply assuming that the problems facing one region are necessarily the same challenges facing those that follow. Certainly, research on the political uprisings, regime ruptures, and transitions elsewhere should inform our study of the MENA today and, indeed, the fact that many scholars who considered regime transitions in other regions have now turned their attention to the Arab world is enriching the scholarship. However, both the study of these phenomena and lessons learned from earlier scholarship need to be done with careful reflection on both the similarities and differences in the cases at hand and the theoretical frameworks underpinning their analyses.

Despite its shortcomings, "Explaining the Unexpected" thus provides a useful platform for scholars of comparative politics to reflect on problems facing the discipline. The authors demonstrate the importance of considering the wide range of scholarship underlying the study of the Arab world, and elsewhere. They highlight problems resulting from the normative biases underpinning the study of comparative politics. And, they reflect the importance of a nuanced discussion about what can be learned from area specialists who faced rapid, regional transformation in the past. Taking these lessons into account and working to counter them can greatly improve the study of comparative politics.

Notes

1 I point to some of these insights in my essay, "Why Now? Micro Transitions and the Arab Uprisings."
2 Albrecht 2010, 26.
3 See Cantori et al. 2002; Lust-Okar 2005; Lust 2009.
4 See, for examples, contributions in El-Mahdi and 2009 and Beinin and Vairel 2011.
5 At the Middle East Studies Association Annual Meeting (MESA) in 2012, of the total 263 political science-related papers, 34 examined mobilization and protests, 18 focused on democratization and political transition, and 7 fit into both categories. In MESA 2013, of the total 404 political science-related papers, 25 focused on mobilization and protests, 10 on democratization and transitions, and 7 fit into both categories. I thank Ariane Noar for her assistance in compiling this information.

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