

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

North Africa: Regional Tensions and Strategic Concerns by Richard Parker

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6706q94p>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 16(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Elmikawy, Noha

Publication Date

1988

DOI

10.5070/F7161016961

Copyright Information

Copyright 1988 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Book Reviews

Parker, Richard. *North Africa: Regional Tensions and Strategic Concerns*. (New York: Praeger, 1987)

Richard Parker's book is a general introduction to the North African region and politics. It has some arguments which reflect sensitivity to regional issues without losing perspective of U.S. strategic interests. However, for a reader who wants a deep and penetrating analysis of the region's dilemmas, both within each North African country and among them, the book falls short of a satisfactory presentation.

Parker declares his objective to be, "to acquaint the reader with the more prominent issues of the region and to give him or her a better grasp of the policy choices confronting the United States." (page xi) He did a good job on the latter, a job that reflects first hand experience with the region. On the other hand, his attempt to acquaint the reader with the issues of the region—namely Islamic revival, the Saharan conflict, and socio-economic development—boils down to an undifferentiated summary of theses which displays but does not scrutinize various assumptions often made about the region.

The book starts with an overview of the North African countries, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Parker surveys the history of each country since pre-colonial times, and he distinguishes the Arab/Berber composition in each country. He further provides a political and economic profile of conservative, traditional Morocco; pragmatic, socialist Algeria; moderate, secular Tunisia; and revolutionary Libya.

Concerned with stability, Parker touches on issues such as the ruling elite and economic performance. He does that in an anthropological fashion, giving less attention to the national interests and rational choices of North African governments. Two examples are pertinent. He claims that institution-building and socio-economic development are doubtful because "the body politic is rarely able to develop and maintain enough loyalty to the state, as opposed to the family,

view of the Arab world which views it as lacking impetus for nation and state building. But it does not square with Parker's account of Morocco, where that quotation appears. Morocco's head of state enjoys legitimacy based on his religious status despite the claimed tribalism. Moreover, the Moroccan monarch managed, according to Parker's own account, to mobilize a nationalistic feeling for the Green March. The second example of Parker's anthropological inclination is an interesting comment he makes about Algerian disappointment over their mediation in the hostage crisis. Parker argues that the Algerians expected the Americans to be grateful for the Algerian favor (helping return the hostages); but they did not show anger when they received no credit because "it is considered bad form in Arab countries to ask for gratitude when you have done a favor." (page 51)

Another problematic point in his survey of the North African countries appears in the case of Tunisia. Parker relies a great deal on the personalities of Bourgeiba, his wife (Wasila) and Mzali to explain the Tunisian political and economic choices despite his criticism of the American tendency to over-identify with personalities.

Being concerned about stability, he covers the Islamic revival in North Africa. There are some problems with Parker's definition of stability and with his account of Islam. Parker's conception of stability in North Africa is very much colored by American interests in the region. When he illustrates the possibility of military coup in Morocco, he is also quick in rejecting it as a good recommendation because military rule is never a sign of stability. However, he acknowledges the possibility that the United States may get along with a conservative group of military officers if they take over in a coup. (page 161)

As for Parker's account of Islamic revivalism, he gives a general overview of the reasons for Islamic revival but does not dwell on the religious ideas pronounced in each of the three accounts of some action and counter action by the moslem groups and the governments in the three states of North Africa. The main point of the chapter, I take it, is that Islam and modernization are incompatible. Parker sometimes uses modernization and westernization interchangeably. It may have helped to display the range of positions that North African Moslem ideologues have on socio-economic issues that

are critical to development, hence affecting stability in North Africa.

Parker's contribution to the understanding of foreign policy in North Africa is shown in the chapter on North Africa and the powers (France, Italy, Spain, and the USSR), and that on U.S. policies. Particularly useful is his argument that the Soviet presence in the Mediterranean is not as impressive as that of the U.S. in terms of naval base facilities and carrier/airborne capacity. He also stresses the lack of ideological bases for the Soviet Union in the region. The Soviet-North African relations are often based from the African side on desperation due to American and European disinterest. Pragmatism and alignment to third world issues, on the part of the Soviets, characterizes the basis of relations with North Africa. The Soviet Union follows North African concerns and not vice versa.

The discussion of American foreign policies in North Africa is a brief account of what induces and constrains American action. It introduces the lay reader to a host of factors that make American policy makers tick. Parker attributes the low profile of North Africa in the American mind to the lack of a domestic lobby for the region, lack of threat for American lives in the region, and lack of economic threat posed by the region to the American industrial establishment.

His critique of the American tendency to simplify regional politics by identifying with the rulers and categorizing them as "ally" or radical is well taken. It has led to over commitment in Morocco, under commitment in Algeria (the U.S. misses the chance to capitalize on its economic ties to Algeria because it identifies its leaders as radicals). Identification with personalities of rulers has also led to overreaction in the case of Libya.

Therefore, the book is recommended for students of American regional foreign policy. It may only be used as a supplementary reading for students of comparative politics of the Arab or Moslem world.

Noha Elmikawy
Political Science Department
UCLA