

# UC San Diego

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*The Myth of Middle East exceptionalism: Unfinished Social Movements.* By Mojtaba Mahdavi. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2023. Pp. xvi, 356. \$44.95 (paperback) ISBN: 9780815637929.

Mojtaba Mahdavi, the editor of this book is a Professor of Political Science and chair in Islamic Studies of the Edmonton Council Communities at the University of Alberta. He is the author and editor of numerous works on post-Islamism, contemporary social movements, democratization in the Middle East and North Africa, postrevolutionary Iran, and modern Islamic political thoughts.

This book is compiled and edited by Mahdavi, features revised versions of selected papers from an international interdisciplinary conference “*The Unfinished Project of the Arab Spring: Why the Middle East Exceptionalism Is Still Wrong*” with some chapters by guest scholars. It consists of sixteen parts exploring various social movements in different regions of the Middle East. Part 1, emphasizes the significance of progressive, democratic social movements in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, offering insights into alternative social organizations and challenging Eurocentric views of “world-history.” Overall, this part offers perspectives on exceptionalism, interventionism, and resistance in the MENA region, introducing various concepts and references different movements and historical events to support its arguments.

Part 2 starts by highlighting the importance of examining the lessons and constraints of democratization in Arab states following the Arab Spring. However, it argues that equal attention should be given to the possibilities and constraints of democratization in Israel/Palestine. It emphasizes the need to focus on race and power dynamics in the region to fully understand these issues.

Part 3 examines mainstream theories in social movement studies and their applicability to the MENA region. It asserts that mainstream theories are based on universalistic assumptions and Western-centric perspectives, and it suggests the need for theories that are attuned to the unique socio-political contexts of MENA to better capture the dynamics of mobilization and resistance in the region. Part 4 talks about China's approach to the Syrian conflict involved vetoing

resolutions to prevent sanctions and Western intervention, aiming to maintain its status and avoid being taken advantage of.

Part 5, emphasizes decolonial theories and a politicized approach in studying ISIS, challenging Orientalist and racist approaches. It suggests that a decolonial response is a more substantial solution than purely military approaches to addressing social, economic, and political grievances of marginalized groups. For instance, it highlights the disconnection between the people and the leaders installed or supported by the United States in post-2003 Iraq, along with the failure to recognize anti-corruption, sectarianism, and government protests as mobilization within Iraqi society.

Part 6 explores the actions citizens can take to effect change, emphasizing the significance of resistance, organization, and protest in striving for a better world. It centers on the defeat of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the potential for mass movements to create unforeseen events.

In part 7, while traditional revolutionary actors like workers and teachers are recognized, it also emphasizes unconventional revolutionaries such as housewives, the unemployed, and children. Arab youth's role in shaping citizenship is particularly explored, showcasing their resilience facing challenges and attempts to suppress their voices.

Part 8 reflects on the power of expression through songs, music, movies, and social media and their ability to be absorbed with durable social meaning, revolutionary or otherwise and the limits of its social power. It discusses cases and examples of such powers.

Part 9 talks about analysts struggle in imagining future models of social, political, and economic organization in the Middle East. It suggests that despite uncertainty about the long-term impact of recent conflicts, the spread of nonviolent strategies in the region could empower civil societies positively.

Part 10 examines the cyclical nature of student activism in post-revolutionary Iran, highlighting the importance of political freedom and societal engagement. To achieve this, the study recommends establishing solidarity with groups like women's and labor movements, utilizing new communication technologies, expanding outreach, and involving the public in university events.

Part 11 discusses the precarious survival of Christian communities in the Middle East, particularly the Arab Spring. Despite their ties to recognized indigenous churches and their participations in protests, majoritarianism and uncompromising Islamism led some to seek

refuge under authoritarian corporatism. The pursuit of democratic and inclusive pluralism, and the unfinished project of the Christian Arab Spring, could be the establishment of enduring inclusive pluralism.

Part 12 highlights the need for Muslims to challenge unquestioned authority and establish more inclusive forms of authority, particularly in movements like Da'ish. This analysis takes a gender-inclusive approach.

Part 13 explores the significance of queer activism and the LGBTQI+ movement during the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, highlighting the commune's role as a space for queer resistance, changing perceptions and attitudes towards the LGBTQI+ community, and challenging heteronormative values in Turkey and beyond.

Part 14 asserts that contrary to popular belief, social movements in the MENA region did not disappear after the suppression of the Green Movement in Iran or the military coup in Egypt. While street protests may have diminished, activists, reformers, human rights advocates, and women's groups, and the street and online activism have facilitated the creation of networks and virtual "civil societies" where ideas and information are shared and have become vital platforms for feminist discourse, enabling MENA activists to address various forms of inequality and engage in conversations on local, regional, and global issues.

Part 15 focuses on analyzing women's engagement during the Tunisian revolution of 2010-11, and their collective action within Tunisia's historical, political, and socioeconomic context. The study explored how women's activism intersected with governance processes, regime policies, gender institutions, and societal symbols.

Finally, Part 16, argues that the prominence of gender issues during the Arab Spring movements stems from the intersection between the political and social realms. It discusses the importance disseminating ideas that are not exclusive to Egyptian or Arab Muslim socio-politics but are rooted in a global construction of social-political opposition.

This well-researched book reflects on the revolutionary uprisings of 2010s to 2020s in the Arab and Muslim world. Avoiding any stereotypes and generalization, it critically examines an outdated orientalist discourse of Middle East Exceptionalism, with a focus on social movements, gender studies, Islamic studies, and critical race theory. It is a valuable scholarly work that could fit in any library

setting, primarily academic libraries, and could help understanding the dynamics of social and political change in the Middle East.

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*Pious peripheries: Runaway women in post-Taliban Afghanistan.* By Sonia Ahsan-Tirmizi. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. Pp. xiii, 239. \$26.00 (paperback) ISBN: 9781503614710.

Sonia Ahsan-Tirmizi is a lecturer in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University. In this work, the author discusses sexual promiscuity in Afghanistan, focusing on the post-Taliban era.

This book was written based on 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork that Ahsan-Tirmizi carried out in a women's shelter in Kabul and is comprised of her conversations and interviews, and observations taken when accompanying those shelter women at the court while they were trying to negotiate with their families.

Ahsan-Tirmizi explains that women's shelters across the world are considered as a place of refuge against any type of violation. These shelters in Afghanistan are called *khana-yi aman*, which literally means "home of safety" for women as runaways who are sanctioned socially or legally by the state. The runaway women could be daughters, sisters, or wives of families, including members of the Taliban. Runaways are escaping abuse or violation because they seek a divorce or a marriage of which their families do not approve. So in pursuing ways to get their rights, they are tagged as promiscuous. In her fieldwork, Ahsan-Tirmizi explored these women's resistance through mechanisms such as Islamic practices (praying, fasting), or singing poetry or songs to show their ownership of Afghan society as Pashtunwali women. In this way, they create a defense system within their supported community, that is, the shelter (*khana-yi aman*).

Through various examples, the author shows that in the Taliban and post-Taliban state, it is simply impossible to fight against injustice and violence in Afghanistan's courts when it comes to women's rights, be the fight against a mandated marriage or getting a divorce or claiming an inherited property.