

Review of *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*. By Jean-Pierre Filiu. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 208pp. \$21.95. ISBN 978 0 19 989829 9.

Jean-Pierre Filiu, a French historian and Arabist, is currently teaching at Sciences Po in Paris but also holds scholarships at the US universities of Colombia and Georgetown. The primary focus of his work lies on issues concerning contemporary Islam and works like *Les frontières du jihad*, *L'Apocalypse dans l'Islam* and *Les Neuf Vies d'Al-Qaida* have been translated into a dozen languages. They enjoy a highly regarded reputation in the scientific community as well as public interest, especially in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Moreover, his experience as a French diplomat in the Middle East and his language skills make Filiu a reliable expert to the field.

In his work *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (original title: *La Révolution arabe: Dix leçons sur le soulèvement démocratique*) Filiu attempts to order and put into context the most recent events that shook the Arab world. As a historical assessment, the book appeared relatively early on the market, as it was written between February and April 2011, and consequently published in September the same year. The account's proximity to the events is certainly of great value to the academic community, but also imposes the biggest restraints on the analysis as the events are far from being completed and a valid evaluation of its regional and global impact remains challenging. The author, therefore, does not cease to remind the reader to think of the book as a temporal assessment and a historic contextualisation, rather than a general evaluation of the revolutions.

Concerning the uprisings, the dynamics of publication in the wake of the events has to be considered. When the Tunisian spark lit the fire of the Arab Revolution, the news made it around the world within hours, first on the internet via live blogs, Youtube videos and Twitter messages. This rather chaotic form of 'reporting' was followed by established news channels. Qatar based al-Jazeera led the way by showing news feeds and video footage from social media sites during its newsreels. This footage, however, was marked as such an unreliable source and the news channel consequently sent in their own reporters to verify the information.¹ The first books on the 'Arab Spring' that became available a few months later were based on such sources and authored by journalists, as well as experts and political advisers on the Middle East.

¹ See Albrecht, Holger/Demmelhuber, Thomas (eds.): *Revolution und Regimewandel in Ägypten*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2013: 175.

In *The Arab Revolution - Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*, Filiu then is one of the first to go beyond the profession's usual reaction within scientific journals and to publish a historical assessment of the uprisings. Although he has since (publication: September 2011) been joined by various other attempts to put the recent events of the Arab World into a historical perspective, the analysis is still used as a reference point as its lessons address the issues that have consequently become the dominant debates on the region.² The approach he chose is a mixture of the bare narrative of the various revolutions — due to his timely writing (February to April 2011) mainly Tunisia, Egypt and Libya — connected on different levels with his 'ten lessons' learned from the Arab Spring in order to do away with common misconceptions that have circulated since 2011. His main goal: to put the Arab Revolution into a historical context (p. 3).

The first two chapters of the book (*Arabs are no exception* and *Muslims are not only Muslims*) can be summarised under the term of 'identity' of the revolutionary subjects. The concepts of 'Arab' and 'Muslim' are each dedicated a full chapter and the author uses the opportunity to recapitulate the recent history of various Arab countries, as well as what others have termed the 'Islamist Renaissance', a term that Filiu evaluates in the last chapter. The narrative is then closely connected to 'orientalist' misconceptions about the Arab culture and Islam. The author engages on the common views that the extraordinary longevity of the various (autocratic) Arab regimes is based on some kind of 'immaturity' (p. 5) and the somehow assumed incompatibility of Islam with concepts of modernity and rational thought. Filiu then uses the recent events to show that first, the various grass-roots movements do in fact demand the extension of human rights and democratic ideas to their own countries, thus rendering invalid the Western justifications for the support of the autocrat regimes in exchange for regional stability; and second, to stress the inclusive (and predominantly secular) nature of the protest movements. While one can certainly agree on Filiu's thesis that religious groups did not launch the initiative for the protests, the notion that the 'Islamic factor' was irrelevant for the Arab Revolutions (p. 25) has been re-examined in the light of the election results in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as the current developments in the Syrian Civil War, which was, however, hardly predictable in April 2011 when the book was written.

Chapters six, seven and eight then further elaborate on the Islamic factor and add the narrative of political Islam (both radical and moderate) to the authors analysis of the revolutions and its historical context. The structure of the argument is based on the decade-old, artificial *status quo* generated by the 'us-or-the-Islamists' dichotomy, which allowed Arab rulers from the Atlantic to the Gulf to sell their own regimes — in bold defiance of human rights and democratic principles — as a desirable alternative to chaos, or worse, another Iranian nightmare (p. 73-74). When al-Qaeda

² See Denselow, James. Rev. of *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*, by Jean-Pierre Filiu. *International Affairs* Vol. 87, No. 6 (2011): 1543-1545, here 1543.

‘hijacked an entire religion’ and crashed it into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in September 2001, the following ‘Global War on Terror’ may well have served many an Arab ruler in order to silence domestic dissent (Islamist and secular) under the pretext of fighting terrorism (p. 76). Again, Filiu stresses the absence of Islamist elements in both the Tunisian and Egyptian movements and praises the discipline of the peaceful protesters, however, contrasts this with the respective regimes’ ‘gamble on chaos’ in a last attempt to validate their own prophecy in episodes of government-sponsored looting or the infamous camel battle on Tahrir Square; a gamble that badly backfired on the regimes (p. 80-81.).

The moderate branches of political Islam (mainly the Muslim Brotherhood and its local offshoots) are then still attributed a choice between a (mostly conservative) path that had prevailed during a period of illegal or semi-legal opposition and what the author calls the ‘Turkish model’, the incorporation of Islamic ideas in a pluralistic context on both the political and ideological level (p. 69). The main challenge for Islamists then consists of the transition from the role of the opposition into mainstream politics.

The ‘Jihadis’, on the other side, as a manifestation of the radical side of political Islam find themselves outplayed by the popular uprising that rendered their radical slogans invalid, stole the spotlight as a major source of attraction and crushed their base for popular support and potential recruitment. With various case studies in different Arab countries, Filiu supports his thesis that al-Qaeda was caught off guard by the popular uprisings and is in fact losing ground; however would profit from counter-revolutionary trends (p. 118).

The three chapters in between then focus on particularities of the different Arab Revolutions itself. In *Anger is power for the younger* Filiu analyses the youth as a class in the socioeconomic context of their countries as well as their growing trans-regional ties fuelled by an expanding Arab public sphere (p. 34). The source of their anger then consists of a mixture of a reality that, on the one hand, left a whole generation of educated young people on the outside of a system without any real potential to escape the cycle of economic and political sterility, and on the other side of the bold injustice of the ruling regime, visible on a daily base and further fuelled by the hypocritical paternalism of the rulers. For Filiu the ‘apolitical generation’ did indeed become the vanguard of the revolution, a valid assertions that is also quite visible in the cultural scene (p. 37), however, their role in the consequential transition period in both Tunisia and Egypt has to be re-evaluated in face of the democratic process (p. 31).

The chapters *Social networks work* and *Leaderless movements can win* then play homage to the revolutions’ most famous notions. After providing a summary of the Arab internet history, Filiu engages on the exceptional online-aspects of the revolution. Various episodes of internet censorship up to the complete shutdown in Egypt on January 27, 2011 underline the importance of the anti-

regime blogging scene as the most important form of dissent in the years before the uprisings and provide some dramatic stories of arrests and torture of online activists (p. 49-50). As he asserts these aspects an informative rather than an organising nature, Filiu, however, refrains from the notions of a 'Revolution 2.0' (p. 56) as do most of his colleagues and instead focuses on the idea of a successful leaderless movement (p. 57).

Analysing the pattern of the protest movements from the Atlantic to the gulf he asserts a leading role to the slogans and a catalogue of similar objectives of the different movements, all demanding the change (not just replacement) of the political system, which for decades has been a combination based on a partisan state and the security apparatus (p. 58-59). Dissent in such a repressive reality, so Filiu, forcibly is of a decentralised nature, and, when the opportunity is given by a triggering event (Bouazizi's self-immolation to name the most famous one), will formulate a protest movement pattern according to the country's demographic particularities (p. 64).

The chapter on Palestine (*Palestine is Still the Mantra*) somewhat illuminates that the ideas of the transnational Arab solidarity go far beyond the sociopolitical situation of their home country. Comparable to the solidarity expressed online during the protests of 2011, Filiu defines the situation in the occupied territories as a common experience of the Arab generation that was carrying the revolutions of 2011. The author demonstrates that Palestine indeed remains a sensible issue that — in contradiction to previous notions — left a highly politicised generation who grew up with the images of injustice and the heroes of the intifadas (p. 121-124). That the respective rulers were more or less paralysed (if not collaborating) in the face of the US-Israeli geopolitical supremacy certainly did not help to raise popular support for their regimes (p. 126-127).

While the chapter on Palestine is somewhat singled out, the last chapter (*No Domino Effect in the Renaissance*) serves to summarise the statements made before as well as a voice for caution in the assessment of the process. Again, the author reminds the reader that the nature of the ongoing events does not allow far-fetched conclusions. One of such premature assertions, which was raised in the wake of the early success of the Tunisian and Egyptian movements, was the one of an 'Arab domino effect'. Filiu insists on the fact that, despite the growing pan-Arab public sphere, offline protest movements were without exception contained to the country's borders (p. 193). Although the various protest movements supported each other morally and inspired one another, no physical intervention crossed the relatively stable postcolonial borders. The term 'renaissance', associated with various 19th century reformers in the Arab context, allows Filiu to draw parallels to the events of 2011; a far fetched comparison that the author consequently denies whatsoever (p. 141). In quite a suasive conclusion incorporated in this last chapter, the author reevaluates the factors he deemed essential for the success of the revolutions and narrows them down to the movements inclusive

nature as key factor to future change in the Arab world; a process that has shown results but whose dynamics are far from fading.

As a relatively recent publication, the book has evoked little critical reaction beyond occasional reviews in scientific papers. In this context, his colleagues mainly address the authors shortcoming of situating his work within a scientific context. John Waterbury, a renowned expert on modern Egyptian history, for example, misses the work's contextualisation within the broader literature on authoritarianism and democratic transitions.³ Indeed, the author does not go far beyond an occasional mentioning of Hourani's *A History of the Arab Peoples*, but then because his main aim is to familiarise the reader interested in the Arab Revolutions with its basic historical context, not to analyse the academic debates on the subject. The analysis thus leaves little contact surface for an encampment in any school of thought dealing with the region.

Jean-Pierre Filiu provides a valuable and easy-to-read account of the early stages of the Arab Revolutions, aimed at providing a historical context the the ongoing events. Naturally, his work remains a preliminary assessment, however, the author manages to draw valid conclusions beyond the contemporary context.⁴ As a quick response to the dynamics unleashed in spring 2011, Filiu's book is compellingly accurate as a first historical analysis of the Arab Revolutions that aims to engage the general public, as well as students new to the field. Due to the broad set of lead questions, however, researchers looking for in-depth historical analysis will find little in the book beyond basic source references, as the author was forced to compromise scientific positions for the overview character, which in turn leaves the chapters somehow loosely connected by the encompassing theme of the ten lessons.⁵ The reader, however, is finds what he is promised: Ten lessons on the Arab Revolutions and an introduction to their historical context.

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³ See Waterbury, John. Rev. of *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*, by Jean-Pierre Filiu. *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 91, No. 5 (2012): 201.

⁴ See Rhodes, Fred Rodes, Fred. Rev. of *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*, by Jean-Pierre Filiu. *The Middle East* No. 426 (2011): 64.

⁵ See Kiliç, Ramazan. Rev. of *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*, by Jean-Pierre Filiu. *Insight Turkey* Vol. 14, No. 4 (2012): 198.