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BOOK REVIEWS

Informal Power in the Greater Middle East. Hidden Geographies, Edited by Luca Anceschi, Gennaro Gervasio and Andrea Teti. New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 226.

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Before the events of 2011, a prolific scholarship on the Middle East had formed around the study of subaltern politics beyond formal institutionalized channels of influence. Inspired by the works of Asef Bayat, Cilja Harders and Joel Migdal, authors adopting a perspective on Middle East politics ‘from below’ challenged the conception of state institutions as the central fora for political organization. They hinted at the complex entanglement of formal institutions and informal segments of society which constantly modified the modes of governance and the boundaries of state-society relations. In the wake of the ‘Arab Spring’, however, their conceptual groundwork was dramatically overshadowed by a new focus on the changing institutional set-ups of the transition states, and on the revolutionary movements that engendered these changes. Given this research trajectory, it seems appropriate to recall Lisa Anderson’s (2006) seminal ARPS-article ‘Searching where the light shines’ – a note of caution to Middle East scholars not to restrict their attention to the visible institutions of the state and civil society when assessing change in the re-

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gion. The editors of *Informal Power in the Greater Middle East* have taken her warnings to heart. With their focus on the ‘hidden geographies of power’ (p. 3) they offer alternative ways to study the ongoing processes of social transformation in the Middle East beyond the elite vs. street dichotomy. Transcending the ‘Arab Spring’ frame, the 14 free standing chapters include examples from the Maghreb and the Levant, but also discussions of Turkish, Iranian and Turkmen politics as well as case studies from the Horn of Africa. What these well-researched contributions have in common is their focus on the informal channels of interaction between state and non-state actors which co-exist with and complement official institutions, thereby creating alternative accesses to leadership and channels for the distribution of wealth. In the introduction, the editors make this point explicit, underscoring the symbolic power of the Arab Spring in undermining the belief in the formal institutional areas for the articulation and contestation of political interests. In their view, this holds true both for politics from above and from below.

This is evidenced by the first section, ‘Redistributing Power Relations through Informal Alliance’, which has the greatest coherence and centers on the historical role of informal powers and resources as tools for challenging, but also for the reification of socio-political power relations. In this section, Trombetta’s analysis of power structuration in Syria is particularly noteworthy as a critique of statist categories in the study of regime trajectories. Formal institutional setups, he argues, are often merely symptoms of an underlying informal power balance that cuts across institutions: “real power *can* be hidden beyond the exposed/institutional power” (p. 36). To operate, authorities need both levels of power – which places the formal and the informal in a dynamic dialectical relationship, Sadiki asserts (p. 11). The corollary of this is that “power cannot ever be entirely monopolized by

one social institution” (p. 41). This can work in favour of subversive forces, such as in Palestine, where traditional clans and kinship networks prevent Hamas and Fatah from achieving full control over their respective territories (see chapter by Alone), or in Turkey, where informal proxy relationships enable banned actors to continue their political work under conditions of authoritarian closure (see chapter by Bacik).

The subsequent section ‘Radicalization and Conflict’ examines this subversive potential for contexts where the architecture of power experienced a significant rupture that reconfigured power relations – either through a revolution, such as in 1979 Iran (chapter by Adib-Moghaddam), or through foreign intervention, as in the case of Iraq (chapter by Isakhan). The cases presented in this section are all highly interesting in their idiosyncrasies. For instance, an excellent study of the Darfur conflict concentrates on state engendered tribalism as a mechanism for the radicalization of political practices across the formal-informal dyad (chapter by Bassil); another chapter sheds light on Somali NGO networks as agents of state transformation (chapter by Saggiomo). The link between these contributions, however, remains vague at best, as does their conceptual relation to the theoretical underpinnings discussed in the introduction. Likewise, the final section on ‘Resistance, Co-optation, Centralization’, an attempt to map the vertical and horizontal patterns of interaction between different contenders, lacks coherence. Certainly, to consolidate their position within national power hierarchies, all the discussed actors relied on both formal and informal resources and strategies – but each in a different way, making it hard to draw parallels between the individual case studies. Moreover, the contributions cover not only different countries, but also alternate in their focus on civil society (in Morocco and Egypt) or elites (in Turkey and Turkmenistan), adding additional layers of difference. The final chapter by Teti makes an effort to situate

the chapter within broader debates on democratization and the role of civil society. However, it offers no comprehensive concluding remarks that could bring together the different cases and reconcile the different aspects discussed in the book. The ‘hidden geographies’ of the formal-informal nexus, unfortunately, remain hidden.

Notwithstanding, *Informal Power in the Greater Middle East* is a carefully researched and highly readable collection of excellent studies. The strength of these contributions is in their detailed empirical descriptions – an emphasis that may disappoint comparativists and prevent the volume from intervening in larger disciplinary debates on democratic backsliding or the global representation crisis. However, despite the lacking comparative angle, the collection makes a significant contribution to the post-Arab Spring research agenda: by extending its geographical focus to peripheral and understudied cases in the Greater Middle East; by exposing the dichotomy between institutional and informal politics as an elusive normative demand rather than an empirical reality; and by illustrating the need for further engagement with notions of informality beyond the limiting frame of ‘culture’.

References

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