

Book Review: The Second Arab Awakening and the Battle for Pluralism by Marwan Muasher

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*In this book **Marwan Muasher** proposes a broad analysis and assessment of the Arab Spring, calling on the West to rethink political Islam and the Arab-Israeli conflict. He also discusses steps all parties can take to encourage positive state-building in a freshly unsettled Arab world. **Filippo Dionigi** finds that some of the author's arguments constitute wishful thinking, but overall his optimism may inspire successful reconciliation between parties in the future.*

The Second Arab Awakening and the Battle for Pluralism. Marwan Muasher. Yale University Press. January 2014.

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The Middle East uprisings of 2011 and 2012 may appear at this point more a parenthesis in the history of the region rather than the beginning of a new chapter. But while we are at the height of a counter-revolutionary phase (apart from Tunisia) a number of publications are being released reflecting upon the four most turbulent years of the post-colonial Middle East.

Marwan Muasher has written a clear and accessible book on the topic, ideal for non-specialised readership and undergraduate students but also informative for those initiated to the politics and society of the Middle East. Muasher is a navigated Jordanian diplomat who acted as ambassador to Israel and the USA and has been part of Jordanian governments; he currently works for the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#). Not casually then, his analysis of the uprisings is not that of someone from the “Arab street” but rather that of a policy expert with a macropolitical regional and global perspective.

Muasher's discussion of what he defines the “Second Arab Awakening” (the first awakening being the late 19th early 20th century Arab [Nahḍa](#)) stimulates the reader with several considerations often persuasive and richly-supported with empirical data from Gallup's surveys and elite-level interviews. If, [following Isaiah Berlin's taxonomy](#), we had to classify Muasher as a “fox” or a “hedgehog”, the latter seems to be the most proper category. His argument is not about minute details; instead he draws the attention of his readers on “one big thing” missing in Middle Eastern politics that is a “culture of pluralism”.

Muasher claims that in the wake of the Arab uprisings a duopoly has emerged within the Arab states that experienced uprisings. On one hand we have the Islamist groups that have gained traction politically through elections; on the other hand has emerged a fragmentary secularist force which gathers bits and pieces of the Ancien Régime and secularist factions formed after the uprisings. The problem is – so goes Muasher's argument – that none of these political components has genuinely committed to a liberal principle of governance whereby majority and opposition interact in a constructive dialogical process of checking and balancing over their policies.

Quite the contrary, the secular opposition has lived with anxiety over the rise of Islamists to power and has never fully acknowledged the legitimacy of their elected governments. Vice versa, the Islamists have rarely made concessions, if any, to their opposition thus playing into this zero sum game of reciprocal annihilation. In Muasher's own words, “The Arab Awakening has clearly demonstrated that the commitment to democratic norms by both Islamists and secular elements – the old regime as well as those emerging third forces – is still skin-deep” (p.36). There is a need, therefore, for the emergence of a culture of pluralism understood as the “fundamental commitment

to political diversity at all times” and the acknowledgement that “no party has a monopoly on the truth and no party can impose its views on the rest of society” (p.165). A “third force” should come about in the political panorama of the region, one that is characterised by a commitment to gradual political reform, inclusive political growth and is truly committed to democratic and liberal principles.

While developing this argument the book proposes both a broad analysis and assessment of events and a set of policy suggestions. Muasher’s analysis is particularly interesting and nuanced in its consideration of the case of Islamist parties. He calls for an end to the paranoia towards Islamist parties in cases as Egypt and Tunisia. There is a need to accept the legitimacy of political actors notwithstanding their undeniable defects and ambiguities. He sees this as a necessary step for the rise of a culture of pluralism in the region and justifies the claim by pointing out that exclusion and marginalisation are unproductive and cause radicalisation instead.

Several scholars, such as [Dalacoura](#) and [Schwedler](#), have shown that the link between political inclusion and moderation of Islamist movements is not as straight forward as Muasher claims, but his analysis is still persuasive and a good antidote to common stereotypical and misleading views on Islamists recently epitomised in a speech by [Tony Blair](#). One important aspect that the author does not seem to acknowledge is that opposition to Islamists’ rule has not only been coming from the domestic critics of Islamists and some sectors of western policy making (the latter being relatively open minded towards the rise to power of Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt), but importantly also from regional hegemonic powers which now support, for example, the rule of General Sisi in Egypt. Muasher’s call for pluralism and acceptance of Islamists should be directed also, and perhaps foremost, to the very political elite to which the author belongs.

What should be the priorities for policy makers in the region? Muasher offers a number of considerations which do not break new ground but are nonetheless well justified. Emphasis is rightly put on the reform of education – a subject oft-neglected by democracy promoting social engineers – in order to form a new and autonomous class of citizens that will then be able to animate the democratic and pluralist political life the author advocates for. Furthermore, he calls repeatedly for systematic and urgent reforms of the political, economic, and social sectors also in those states that have not experienced regime change in the past four years. In order to avert the disruption of mass street protests, he advocates for a top-down reform process which has already been delayed for too long and that should be inclusive, holistic, and measurable in its achievements. Whereas Muasher’s call for reform is certainly well put, the expectation that the political elites of states such as Jordan or the Gulf monarchies may implement such reforms *motu proprio* seems misplaced or even wishful thinking, especially now that the old authoritarian guard is making its way back to power. Nonetheless, Muasher also warns us that in the post-2011 Middle East “absolute power has ceased to be an option” (p.27).

Did the return of old elites to power deal a fatal blow to the second Arab awakening? Or is this yet another transition phase confirming Muasher’s view that authoritarianism has become an unviable option for the region? These are questions that we will be able to answer only in a few years’ time; but the hope is that if another opportunity for change should rise, Muasher’s call for pluralist politics and societies will be listened to by all parties willing to build a freer and more equal Middle East.

Dr Filippo Dionigi is a Fellow at the London School of Economics and his research focus on international norms and Islamist movements in the Middle East. He has completed his PhD in International Relations at LSE and is presently working on a book tentatively titled *Hezbollah, Islamist Politics and International Society*. [Read more reviews by Filippo](#).

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