
Book Review: *The Levant Express*

The Levant Express: The Arab Uprising, Human Rights, and the Future of the Middle East by Micheline R. Ishay (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019). 352 pp. US\$30.00 (hbk). ISBN-13: 978-0300215694

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In *The Levant Express: The Arab Uprising, Human Rights, and the Future of the Middle East*, Micheline R. Ishay uses the metaphor that compares the Arab Spring to a high-speed train making its way through the region with demands of human rights and democratization. However, as the Arab Spring chilled and transformed into a cold Arab Winter, the high-speed train is derailed and repressive and authoritarian governments are replaced with even more repressive and authoritarian regimes. She uses the metaphor to whet her reader's curiosity by asking: What will put the high-speed train—demanding human rights—back on its tracks and carry on its journey through the region? Interestingly, however, Ishay's metaphor is not only used to describe the growing demand for human rights during early 2011; rather, she uses it to describe the possibility of actually creating a railroad throughout the region connecting its countries via an economic route that would drive markets and reinvigorate financial and governmental interests between countries. However, the train had to make a stop at the counter-revolutionary intersection that damaged its engine room because of the emergence of fascist and semi-fascist leaders within the Middle East as

well as beyond it, in addition to the significant retraction of Arab revolutionary fervor and demand for change.

The book details the construction of the railroad, the maintenance of it and the benefit it would give to countries in the region both economically and politically. It is split into three parts. In the first, Ishay discusses the recent surge of political upheavals and revolutionary movements in the region, along with the current realities in the countries that witnessed the protests of the Arab Spring. In the second, Ishay addresses the retraction of these revolutions and the lack of success they brought along with them. In fact, she states that calling them “the Arab Spring” was premature when, in fact, they were a prelude to “the Arab Winter.” In the third, she discusses the surge of Islamic movements in the Middle East and the role of women in the region. Lastly, Ishay concludes by examining the current state of the region. She illustrates that there is a lack of a clear future for the region, and the advancement of certain politicians within and outside the region has turned out to be counter-productive for change.

Ishay’s interest in writing the book and critically analyzing the events of the Arab Spring stems from her own experience in the region as a visiting professor at Abu Dhabi’s Khalifa University in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). While there, the Arab Spring broke out and Ishay describes, in the introductory chapter, how she tried to use her classroom as an open arena for Arab students to speak about revolutions and their own ideas of what human rights and democracy means in the Middle East. What is more noteworthy about her story in Abu Dhabi, is that Ishay is a Jewish American and felt the need to conceal that at times while in the Middle East due to the resentment this created as a result of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Ishay dedicates a chapter to address the conflict and titles it “Frost in Jerusalem.” Although Ishay clearly recognizes the need for a solution as well as new blood and strong intellectuals who can rid both peoples of extreme religious and nationalistic ideologies, she avoids taking a stand on the issue. In the analysis of the conflict, Ishay equates the Palestinians with their occupiers: the Israelis.

Ishay also takes readers on an exploration of the role of the Arab woman in the reinstallation of the railroad. For Ishay, her role is front and center and is effectively illustrated through a portrait of Rosie the Riveter, a female American cultural icon representing women who worked and made significant status changes for their gender, sitting against the background of a waving American flag with a rivet gun in her lap and a lunch box. The author describes the existence and active participation of many real-life Rosies in the

Arab Spring. She recounts the stories of women from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen who were featured in a documentary illustrating their active involvement in the revolutionary movements who were harshly silenced in the immediate aftermath of the protests. Their stories, according to Ishay, echo the bitter reality many Arab women have to face. She explains that women are dealt with unfairly in most societies, due to patriarchy and politics. Hence, even after the removal of tyrants during the Arab Spring, women still faced the inequalities of the societies in which they lived. Even so, success stories still existed. Freedom of speech and specific rights for women were included in some of the newly drafted constitutions, such as that of Tunisia and even in Egypt. Other successes were seen in Lebanon, a society that has generally been a trailblazer in civil rights for women, minorities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Ishay's work could have been complemented by interviews with more people throughout the region. The book is not the first on the Arab Spring. Another similar work is Andrew Reynolds, Jason Brownlee, and Tarek E. Masoud's *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform* (2015). Although Reynolds *et al.* cover the Arab Spring and Arab societies fighting against repression, they concentrate more on the factors contributing to the successes of the revolutions of the Arab Spring. However, they fail to address the societal repercussions of the failures brought about by the revolutions and the lack of actual economic gains, civil rights and human rights progress after the movements swept across the region. This is something Micheline R. Ishay addresses and tackles effectively in her book. ■

REFERENCE

Reynolds, A., J. Brownlee, and T. E. Masoud. 2015. *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform*. Oxford University Press/Oxford Scholarship Online.