

# Critical Dialogue

## **The Age of Counter-Revolution: States and Revolutions in the Middle East.** By Jamie Allinson. New York: Cambridge

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The Arab uprisings constituted the largest contemporaneous regionwide mass movement to have erupted in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region). Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain all experienced sustained protest movements that varied in demands: some called for democratic institutional and structural reforms toward inclusive governance, whereas others called for the downfall of long-standing autocratic regimes. More than a decade after the initial wave of protest movements in late 2010 and early 2011, numerous interdisciplinary works have been devoted to explaining various outcomes of the uprisings—ranging from those focusing on structural and institutional factors to those emphasizing dynamics between social forces and state–society relations at domestic, regional, and international levels. Invariably, these works have centered on explaining why the diffusion of regionwide protest movements within a given temporal setting failed to induce progressive social change across the region.

Jamie Allinson's timely contribution, *The Age of Counter-Revolution: States and Revolutions in the Middle East*, adds to the few cross-national comparisons of uprisings and protest outcomes on the subject, including our own book, *After the Arab Uprisings: Progress and Stagnation in the Middle East and North Africa*, and the seminal work by Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds, *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform* (2014). Allinson's book diverges in scope and framing from the extant literature on the Arab Spring in shifting the analytical lens from the discourse on "democratization versus authoritarian resilience" (p. 9) to a focus on factors and forces that produce "Arab un-democracy" (p. 8) through what he terms a Marxist analysis (p. 18) of revolution and counterrevolution. Allinson advances an argument of the Arab uprising that emphasizes counterrevolution as a response to revolutionary mass

mobilization. Through a cross-national comparison of revolutions and counterrevolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the book undertakes pair-structured comparisons between Tunisia and Egypt in chapter 4, militarized counterrevolutions in Syria and Bahrain in chapter 5, and revolutions and state collapse in Libya and Yemen in chapter 6. Chapter 7 offers an outlier comparison of ISIS and Rojava, the Kurdish enclave in Northeast Syria, as cases of revolutionary situations.

Rather than focusing exclusively on explaining the factors that contributed to revolutionary failure, Allinson is interested in answering why Arab counterrevolutions were successful (p. 19). He defines a counterrevolution as a project supported by various social movements and international alliances that attempt to reverse a revolution (p. 21); interestingly, this definition treats class as secondary in his Marxian analysis.

Central to this study, and a question invariably addressed by the vast and interdisciplinary scholarship on the Arab Spring, is whether the uprisings that engulfed the region from late 2010 into 2011 even qualify as revolutions. Eschewing works that posit that the Arab uprisings fail to constitute revolutions in the conventional sense (e.g., Asef Bayat on "refolutions" and our own book), Allinson's book treats mass uprisings across six case studies as "revolutionary situations" because they produced profound political changes and alternative political institutions (p. 21); he does concede, however, that they did not lead to class-based social transformations. An established body of literature over the past decade has examined the factors and forces behind authoritarian reversal, resilience, and durability. Allinson, however, prefers to present them as counterrevolutionary. This begs the questions of who the revolutionary forces were in each country case study and to what extent the "revolutionary situations" were viable. We return to this issue shortly.

As a work of historical sociology, the book relies methodologically on an "incorporated comparison" (p. 25) to elucidate the enduring effects of historical developments on the modern phenomenon of counterrevolution. However, the weight of history and of a seemingly path-dependent argument the author alludes to is undertheorized when juxtaposed with a vast literature in both comparative historical sociology and historical institutionalism as analytical toolkits for mapping the weight and

effects of a long *durée* of historically contingent events on contemporary outcomes. One is left wanting more clarity on what, exactly, is an incorporated comparison, why it is distinctively instructive for a cross-national comparison rather than other methods such as a structured or focused cross-national comparison, and how it facilitates a distinct operationalization of the variables underpinning the cross-national comparison.

Readers will find much that is instructive in the book. The descriptions of the uprisings in Bahrain and Yemen make for compelling reading. We share Allinson's admiration of Tunisia's political revolution and the role of the UGTT then and during the 2013 crisis. (Our own book's analysis anticipates the authoritarian reversal that occurred after July 2021, as Tunisia's revolution faced an unfavorable global economic environment.) We agree that although each uprising had national frames and distinctions, all were influenced by global and regional dynamics. Like us, Allinson highlights differences in the dynamics of twentieth-century revolutions compared with the Arab uprisings. Early on, he notes the counterrevolutionary role of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan (p. 43), but he claims that the United States played "next to no role" (p. 171) in the Arab uprisings and denies any US involvement in Syria. (There is ample evidence, however, of CIA destabilization activities in Syria as early as 2008, reported in the *New York Times*, as well as *USA Today*, and former President Obama is on record informing US senators in early 2013 that the CIA had trained and dispatched to Syria an insurgent element). Indeed, works by May Darwich, Ariel Ahram, Shamiran Mako, and Fred H. Lawson, among others, have illustrated the effects of foreign interventions—both regional and international—on democratization outcomes in the Arab uprisings. Allinson emphasizes the role of regional powers and rivalries in the disruption of the revolutionary situations, notably those pitting Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar, but falls short of problematizing Turkey's role in enabling jihadist entry into Syria.

A work of historical sociology might also have addressed issues of gender. There are some references to women's roles in the various uprisings, but the book makes no attempt to consider how the confluence of decades of male-dominated polities, militarism, and international interventions shaped the violent nature of the uprisings and their unhappy outcomes—for women and men alike—in all six countries but Tunisia. Years ago, Val Moghadam asked, "Is the future of revolution feminist?" and argued that without women's mass presence and leadership, any potential revolution would fail.

Ultimately, we find perplexing Allinson's characterization of revolutions, revolutionaries, and counterrevolutionaries. Regarding Yemen, the Houthis are designated part of the revolutionary protest encampments (p. 100) but in chapter 6 they are counterrevolutionaries, in the

same camp as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. ISIS/ISIL/Da'esh is classified as counterrevolutionary (as though there was some debate about their utterly reactionary and regressive nature). Allinson spends some time criticizing the literature on classic or social revolutions (notably Perry Anderson and Theda Skocpol) that, he claims, would have included Da'esh as a revolutionary force and their so-called Caliphate a revolutionary state. To the contrary, both Anderson (a Marxist) and Skocpol (a liberal inspired by the works of Barrington Moore but also cognizant of Marxist writings on revolution) emphasize "class-based" social transformations. What was the dominant class in any purported Da'esh "revolution"? Oddly, Allinson designates Da'esh counterrevolutionary not because it sought transformation but because it intended to "preserve existing social relations" (p. 219). This begs the question: How was the Da'esh genocidal campaign of antagonizing, targeting, and brutalizing local populations in the territories it dominated a preservation of existing social relations? Da'esh emerged and functioned to create and propagate an exclusionary and repressive radical Sunni Islamist ideology rooted not in class liberation but in violence couched in jihad. It was hardly in the business of preserving existing ethnic, gender, or social relations and was closer to the atrocious Khmer Rouge of Cambodia (another result of US military intervention) than any twentieth-century social or political revolution.

Our own analysis of the Arab uprisings does not assume that what occurred in the Arab countries could resemble the past "great" social revolutions, in part because of the absence of a class-based "vanguard" party or political force with the capacity to build coalitions and present a unifying strategy for transformation—whether at the national, regional, or international level. The era of pervasive neoliberal capitalism has affected all manner of institutions, social forces, and values, limiting and constraining the capacity of progressive revolutionaries. In this respect, the Arab uprisings differed also from the array of 1960s and 1970s Third World revolutions that occurred in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa—although many of those were undermined by counterrevolutionary forces internally and externally. Instead, in our book we ask why more limited political revolutions leading to democratic transitions—even pacted transitions—could not occur in the Arab region, and we do so within a framework grounded in four explanatory variables.

Returning to Allinson's study, we are left wondering who the revolutionaries were in each case and why the counterrevolutions succeeded. In addition to the varied forms of external intervention, could this counterrevolutionary success have occurred because of the absence of organized class forces? The absence of coalition building between opponents of the authoritarian regimes? The lack of progressive ideology, leadership, and strategy? A

fragmented opposition, unable or unwilling to negotiate with representatives of the state? Which social class or coalition of social groups were or could have been the carrier of the ideals of the Arab Spring, able to bring them to fruition? Who could have consolidated democracy and effected a major redistribution of property and income, with recognition and rights for women, youth, and religious and ethnic minorities?

Nevertheless, *The Age of Counter-Revolution* makes an important cross-national comparison to an established body of literature by challenging existing explanations of divergent outcomes of the Arab uprisings through a revolution-counterrevolution framework currently understudied in the expansive literature. Allinson's detailed account of change from above and below throughout the six country case studies examined in the book advances our understanding of how processes of change unfolded across time and space.

**Response to Shamiran Mako and Valentine M. Moghadam's Review of *The Age of Counter-Revolution: States and Revolutions in the Middle East***

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— Jamie Allinson 

I would like to thank Val Moghadam and Shamiran Mako for their engagement with my book and for their probing critique, which has given me the opportunity to further develop some of my ideas and arguments.

I would agree with much of what Moghadam and Mako have to say in their response, particularly on the transformation of revolution and the (relative) absence of a programmatic politics of social transformation in 2011. This is an argument that is now well known in works on the Arab revolutions (Moghadam and Mako's among them), whereas the focus of my book is on the understudied phenomenon of counterrevolution.

Moghadam and Mako highlight the following points for critique in my book: my method of incorporated comparison versus a more country-focused approach, my argument that ISIS is counterrevolutionary, the place of class in my explanatory framework, and my engagement with gender. There are also some points of critique that I think have misinterpreted what I was saying in the book, which I am glad to have the opportunity to clarify.

To begin with the methodological objection, I chose a method of incorporated comparison rather than the more Millian approach adopted by Mako and Moghadam because—as I argue in my introduction—the units being compared cannot be treated as fully separate entities. Where a classic comparative method would identify a shared outcome and seek the similarities between units of comparison with otherwise different starting points to

identify causal mechanisms leading to that outcome, incorporated comparison recognizes not just that the “units” are intertwined from the beginning but also so are the mechanisms. In a work of finite length, this choice meant paying somewhat less attention to the country-specific path dependencies that Moghadam and Mako identify. Yet no method can fully capture the world it seeks to analyze: there are always trade-offs between precision and comprehensiveness.

The second point, about class and revolutionary and counterrevolutionary subjects, fruitfully identifies another difference in our approach. Class is not, as Moghadam and Mako write, “secondary” to my analysis but central. I draw on a variety of data to map the class bases of the 2011 revolutions, and in subsequent substantive chapters I detail the class composition of the respective counterrevolutionary subjects in each country. Where we differ is in the understanding of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary subjects. Neither of these, in my argument, is identical to any particular social class or grouping but is rather formed from coalitions and fragments of these in the revolutionary process: classes do not line up neatly on one side or the other.

Mako and Moghadam also point usefully to my approach to gender. I do not agree that I pay as little attention to “decades of male-dominated polities” as they suggest. In both my theoretical framework and all my case studies, I integrate not only women as revolutionary actors but also gender as a site of counterrevolutionary contestation, particularly in the battles over women's status in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain. Again this may reflect a difference of perspective: rather than asking “were the revolutions feminist,” I am concerned with the ways gender (including counterrevolutionary manifestations of state feminism) interact with revolutionary and counterrevolutionary processes.

In a critique I am sure will be shared by many readers, Moghadam and Mako question the relevant position of ISIS as counterrevolutionaries. “What social relations,” they ask, “were preserved by ISIS?” As I argue in my section on ISIS, whatever the ideological visions of the group themselves, they had no choice but to maintain the social relations of capitalism, particularly extractive capitalism, in Syria. This is one of the reasons why they repressed the revolutionaries of 2011 so viciously and were allowed to do so by the regime so long as it was convenient for Damascus.

One point needs to be clarified: my characterization of the United States playing ‘next to no role’ (p. 294 of my book) was in reference only to the post-2013 negotiations in Syria not, as Moghadam and Mako suggest, the region as a whole.

I would again like to thank Moghadam and Mako, and *Perspectives on Politics* for the opportunity for this productive exchange.

**After the Arab Uprisings: Progress and Stagnation in the Middle East and North Africa.** By Shamiran Mako and Valentine M. Moghadam. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 264p. \$89.99 cloth, \$29.99 paper. doi:10.1017/S153759272300066X

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Shamiran Mako and Valentine Moghadam's *After the Arab Uprisings: Progress and Stagnation in the Middle East and North Africa* represents an important new contribution to scholarship on the fate of the Arab Spring and to questions of democratization, democratic stagnation and democratic reversal more broadly. Mako and Moghadam set out to explain the divergent results of the uprisings that spread across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. They divide seven cases into two groups. The first consists of those states that experienced regime or constitutional change (Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco) and the second those that "failed to bring about reforms or were repressed or descended into civil wars": Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen (p. 3). Using a Millian comparative method of difference, Mako and Moghadam account for this divergence on the basis of four variables: state and political institutions, civil society growth and capacity, gender and women's mobilizations, and international connections and intervention (pp. 13–23).

Mako and Moghadam develop this argument across five thematically organized substantive chapters. The second chapter deals with "pathways to democratization" and offers a comparative perspective on the Arab Spring uprisings. At the heart of this chapter lies a consideration of Samuel Huntington's "Third Wave" of democratization, to which the Middle East and North Africa appeared an exception in the 1990s and 2000s. Mako and Moghadam's central contention here is that "pre-requisites for democracy are societal conditions and collective action," in addition to states that have enough capacity to withstand both transition processes themselves and the threat posed by external intervention to such processes (p. 54). Drawing on existing sociological and feminist work Mako and Moghadam argue that the depth of social movement mobilization has important consequences for the quality of subsequent democratic settlements (p. 36). They ascribe the apparent merging of revolutions, social movements and democratization from the last quarter of the twentieth century to "rising educational attainment, the presence of modern middle classes and the participation of women along with the absence of a centralised party" (p. 35).

There then follow four substantive chapters based on the conceptual framework. In the chapter on "states and political institutions," Mako and Moghadam argue that the sole example of (partially) successful democratic transition in the region (in Tunisia) was in part a result of the

country's "institutional legacy" (p. 96). From the perspective of states and political institutions, Tunisia's transition resembled more closely that of previous Mediterranean or Latin American cases because the Tunisian military enjoyed neither the size nor the centrality to the state of, for example, its Egyptian counterpart, combined with a more vibrant civil society in which the trade union federation (the UGTT) and feminist organizations played a leading role (p. 69). The worst-faring states were those such as Yemen and Libya, in which institutions were weak or dismantled, and Syria where they were assimilated to the "presidential monarchy" of the Assads (p. 85).

The counterpart of state capacity, in Mako and Moghadam's argument, is the vibrancy and breadth of civil society organization. Mako and Moghadam by no means share the fetishization of NGOs and other putative civil society organizations common in 1990s political theory and political science. In a stimulating argument, they distinguish between civil society organizations in advanced capitalist democracies, wherein such organizations often blunt or divert any form of radical challenge, from authoritarian contexts where civil society organizations are more likely to come into conflict with states and regimes (p. 103). Again, the density of civil society was greatest in Tunisia and least in Syria and Libya and, with some caveats, tracked closely the respective divergent outcomes of these states.

In what is the most notable contribution of the book, Mako and Moghadam devote a chapter to gender and women's activism as a variable in their own right. The authors argue that women may or may not need democratization but successful democratization needs women: the absence or repression of women's rights and feminist organisations tends to be correlated with the failure of democratic transition, and the opposite with success (pp. 138–39). Once more, it is in Tunisia and, to some degree, Morocco that the authors find the densest and most active forms of women's mobilization contributing to democratic constitution-making. Mako and Moghadam attribute this outcome in part to the complex legacy of Bourguiba's personal status law and other reforms of the post-independence period in Tunisia, although they take a nuanced view of "state feminism" in the region (pp. 139–42).

In the final substantive chapter on the impact of external influence, Mako and Moghadam distinguish between what they see as potentially prodemocratic forms of external influence through the promotion of civil society and military intervention of various kinds, which they see as harmful to democratization processes (pp. 183–91). Military intervention was most present in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, with Tunisia benefiting from the relative lack of attention paid to the country in the world system. Egypt's transition process was hampered, in contrast, by the overweening role of the United States and the



GCC countries led by Saudi Arabia. Bahrain's revolt was, of course, simply crushed by an intervention emanating from Saudi Arabia.

Mako and Moghadam thus find their conceptual framework of variation across states and political institutions, civil society, gender and women's mobilization, and external intervention validated across their empirical analysis. The book makes a major contribution in foregrounding gender as a variable in the explanation of outcomes in the Arab Spring. There are also points where the argument raises more questions than it answers.

The first concerns the object of explanation: mobilization, democratic transition, revolution, or the mixture of these in the "refolutions" described by Timothy Garton Ash and Asef Bayat (p. 33). Throughout the book the Arab uprisings are referred to as 'revolutions' in inverted commas, which suggests some scepticism in the use of the term. At other points, however, the authors refer—correctly, in my view—to counterrevolutionary policies and "political revolutions" (p. 33). The discussion of Theda Skocpol's definition of revolution suggests that the authors identify revolutions with successful instances of social revolution, which, as they rightly note, are very rare; yet shortly after this, they explain that political revolutions are both possible and more common (p. 32). What is the relationship between the social and political revolutions? Is it possible to have, for example political revolutions (such as democratic transitions) that are simultaneously forms of *social* counterrevolution? And are revolutions only defined as such if they are successful? If so, how would we ever be able to explain revolutions that fail or are defeated?

The object in need of explanation also may not be how revolutionary mobilization has been frustrated or democratic transitions poorly managed, as if all actors involved shared the same interest in democratization as the outcome. Rather, the 2011 uprisings faced well-organized counterrevolutionary elites who achieved their objectives—among which was frustrating any move toward meaningful democracy. This is, in other words, a story of success rather than (just) failure.

A connected question is the relationship between democratization and the "modernization" prerequisites that Moghadam and Mako follow the existing literature in identifying: higher national income per capita and rising educational attainment (pp. 29–32). The correlation between such variables and the existence of electoral democracy is well established for the reasons offered by the mainstream of democratization literature. There is no reason, however, to assume that the opponents of democratization or of political or social revolution represent holdouts to progress as embodied in such variables. Indeed, those opponents may themselves be supremely "modern" in the sense of being well-educated, financialized elites connected to global networks. A more concrete

example can be found in Lisa Wedeen's *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgement and Mourning in Syria* (2019), which shows how a narrative of modernity, progress and social mobility was central to building a coalition of support for the Assad regime's brutal repression of the uprising.

A similar critique might be raised of the role of civil society in Moghadam and Mako's argument. Their use of this concept is nuanced and distinguishes helpfully between the civil society organizations of advanced capitalist societies, which tend to blunt oppositional movements, and those of authoritarian contexts, which are far likelier to raise challenges to the ruling regimes. Yet even within the latter context, it is quite possible for both pro-regime mobilization and civil society organizations to occur and play a significant role in propping up authoritarianism. Civil society may not challenge but rather sometimes support nondemocratic regimes. Tunisia's robust civil society does not seem to have prevented a return to authoritarianism. Another example would be the "Tamarrod" campaign in Egypt that brought mass support to the 2013 coup, including long-standing members of the Left Nasserist opposition such as Hamdeen Sabahi and leaders of the independent trade union federation such as Kamal Abu Eita. A similar role in a different context was played by the so-called National Unity Gathering in Bahrain that mobilized largely Sunni support for the Khalifas. The question of sect and sectarianization in general is one that, without implying any need to reify these concepts, is notably lacking from the substantive analysis.



Along with this nuancing of the endogenous aspects of the argument, the nature and origin of external influence—which Moghadam and Mako rightly point to as crucial for the outcomes of the Arab Spring—could be clarified. This is particularly the case in relation to Syria where the authors seem to imply that the main external intervention consisted of Gulf and Western support for opposition militias (pp. 206–8). This intervention certainly had an effect. One of the consequences of militia competition for (mainly private Gulf) funding was the Islamization and sectarianization of the uprising. Yet these countries had militias to fund because of defections from the Syrian Arab Army after six months of violent repression in 2011 of all forms of protest. As Mako and Moghadam note, Iran provided substantial support to the Assad regime from the beginning of the uprising; far more consequential was the Russian bombing campaign that began in 2015 and effectively saved the regime while killing large numbers of civilians. Recognizing this imbalance would actually strengthen Moghadam and Mako's argument, given the stress they place on external intervention. It is also unclear whether the authors take at face value the election result of 2014 in which Bashar al-Assad was reelected with 88.7% of the vote. As Andrew Gelman noted in a *Washington*

Post article in 2014 (“Why it’s Pretty Obvious the Syria Vote Totals are Fabricated”) these results are highly questionable. The number of votes received by each candidate tally exactly with their respective percentages, as if there were no miscounts, lost ballots, and so on—a result almost unheard of in free elections. Again, the example of this almost certainly manipulated election adds to the logic of Mako and Moghadam’s underlying argument.

I offer these points in a spirit of discussion and dialogue given the significant overlap between our two books. At the time of writing, as young women in Iran currently mobilize to shake the foundations of the Islamic Republic, the contribution of Mako and Moghadam’s *After the Arab Uprisings* is more relevant than ever.

### Response to Jamie Allinson’s Review of *After the Arab Uprisings: Progress and Stagnation in the Middle East and North Africa*

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— Shamiran Mako   
— Valentine M. Moghadam 

We are grateful for Dr. Allinson’s engaging review of our book. We would like to highlight core differences in our approach and analysis. To reiterate, our book offers four explanatory variables—state and political institutions, civil society, gender and women’s mobilizations, and international influences and interventions—for the divergent outcomes across our seven Arab Spring cases and the absence of robust democracies. We compare the Arab Spring protests to those that occurred during the so-called third wave of democratization, finding that the Arab region cases we explore lacked the prerequisites for effective democratization, including a supportive international environment. Indeed, even Tunisia—initially the one successful and highly celebrated case of democratization—suffered economically, leading to the political dysfunction that generated the presidential coup of July 2021.

A key point of divergence in our analysis that both complements and contradicts existing explanations is that we do not consider every uprising to be a revolution. We prefer to use a stricter definition of revolution, differentiating a *social* revolution from a more limited *political* revolution; indeed, the latter occurred in Tunisia. That is, there was no transformation of the mode of production

or of social relations, but rather there were significant changes to the political system: the introduction of political pluralism and an array of new freedoms. We are sympathetic to Dr. Allinson’s notion of *revolutionary situations*, but the forces required for successful revolutionary outcomes were limited or absent, and in the cases of Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, coercive international and regional interventions subverted any prospects of even negotiated pacted transitions.

We appreciate Allinson’s careful attention to the operationalization of the four variables at the center of our framework for explaining divergent outcomes, and we concur that revolutions and counterrevolutions can be interlinked processes. Our main point of contention with classifying the Arab uprisings as revolutions is predicated on measurements and outcomes. We posit that counterrevolutions precede a revolution and are thus causally a product of their reversal. With the exception of Tunisia’s political revolution prior to 2021, we disagree with Allinson’s contention that the cases examined in the book constituted revolutions; conversely, we view them as failed uprisings that stifled revolutionary potential. Similarly, Hosni Mubarak’s ousting from power in 2011—facilitated in large part by the military—enabled the military to gain greater influence in politics and governance, cementing its grip on power culminating in the 2013 coup d’état against the country’s only democratically elected government, that of the late Mohamed Morsi.

In addition to a systematic exploration of domestic developments, we dedicate a chapter to illustrating how various forms of coercive and noncoercive interventions, as well as multiple and overlapping domestic, regional, and international interactions—succeeded in subverting democratization. In doing so, we rely on Lisa Wedeen’s prolific work on Syria in our discussion (pp. 85–88) and argue that political legacies of authoritarian rule undermined the ability of opposition political parties to contest the Ba’th Party’s firm grip on power after 2012, resulting in Bashar al-Assad’s dubious electoral victory in 2014.

Nevertheless, we concur with Allinson’s argument that understanding and explaining the failure of the Arab uprisings requires a multilevel analysis of domestic, regional, and international factors and forces that worked in tandem to undermine democratization and revolutions from taking hold.