

Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution: Voices from Tunis to Damascus

Edited by Layla Al-Zubaidi and Matthew Cassel
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Reviewed by

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“My faith in the future is huge. Although the sacrifices are great I feel optimism. I feel optimism that these sacrifices will not be for nothing. And the demonstrations go on, into the unknown” (Al-Zubadi & Cassel, 2011, p. 208).

This quote from Syrian lawyer, writer, and researcher Khawal Dunia closes *Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution*. For those following the ongoing civil war in Syria, which seems less and less likely to topple President Bashar al-Assad from power, these words now read with a particular bitter sweetness—sweet for the tone of optimism and potential, which surfaces again and again throughout this text, yet bitter for knowing that perhaps that optimism was misplaced and that faith in the progress of democracy and the will of the international community was overestimated since these words were written in 2011.

As highlighted in the book’s introduction by renowned author Samar Yazbek, this work is one profoundly “of the moment.” It is a series of powerful snapshots and often painful illustrations, focused heavily on the moment of the struggle itself, but often lacking in broader context. As a piece for study and use on a college campus, it offers an important non-Western point of view on democracy, modern social media and mobile technologies, and the obligations of the educated class in the 21st century. That said, it also poses some very real challenges from an instructional standpoint that faculty wishing to use this text must approach with thought and care if students are to walk away from the book with anything of value and purpose.

What Is This?

Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution is the American re-branding of the 2013 English Pen Award-winning *Writing Revolution: Voices from Tunis to Damascus*. It is a collection of eight essays, each written by a different author, sharing his or her own very personal account of revolution and societal upheaval during the so-called “Arab Spring” of 2010-2011. The work features an introduction by famed Syrian author and journalist Samar Yazbek, which serves to provide the closest thing this

text has to a statement of context and thematic scope. Yazbek focuses largely on the democratic and “of the moment” nature of 21st century writing, as embodied by social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which made parts of the Arab Spring possible.

This curated collection of narratives and experiences has been assembled by a diverse, but largely unknown, team. The editorial staff, led by Layla Al-Zubadidi of the Heinrich Boll Foundation and journalist Matthew Cassel of Al Jazeera English, has virtually no publishing history of book-length works. The pieces they’ve selected start geographically in the west, with the revolution in Tunisia that ousted President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, and then skip and bounce broadly eastward across Africa and the Middle East onto Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. While starting and ending with the “first” and “last” nations to experience movements associated with the “Arab Spring,” the collection is not otherwise chronological in presentation.

The works themselves are highly idiosyncratic. They are presented by a diverse range of contributors, from idealistic college student cum revolutionaries (“Greetings to the Dawn” by Malek Sghiri), to jaded professional journalists clearly frustrated at the shortening of Arab revolutionary history and struggle to a single season (“We Are Not Swallows” by Ghania Mouffok). What is consistent across all the stories told is their intensely personal nature, the strong sense of place and time for each author, and the undercurrent of revolution and societal pressures which have been present in each of these societies well before the eruption onto the world stage in 2011 that garnered so much international attention. While ranging from poetic to painfully violent, the stories ring with a directness and power which should reach across an admittedly broad cultural divide and strike students right in the hearts and the minds.

Themes and Major Issues

The item alone which makes this work one worth considering for today’s college students is its non-Western worldview. Readers will again and again encounter people and stories that are human, identifiable, empathetic, and profoundly alien. Malek Sighiri, in his discussion of growing up in a revolutionary family in Tunisia, shares that his younger sister is named for Sana’a Mehaidli, a Lebanese resistance fighter who, at the age of sixteen, earned fame as the first female suicide bomber when she blew herself up in an attack on an Israeli convoy in occupied Lebanon. To read of a suicide bomber as a hero rather than a terrorist is profoundly striking in our post-9/11 culture! Students should and will need help piecing through the alien world that most of them will have been sheltered from as young people in America. In an increasingly global economy and culture, our students need to learn how to engage with and appreciate a world of peoples and cultures few Westerners have ever come into contact with.

Other recurring topics rich for discussion include the role of women in what have traditionally been male-dominated societies. Several of the contributors are women and speak powerfully of working to bring down regimes which may be

replaced by fundamental-Islamist ones. This tension between the will of the people and the rights of the minority provides both powerful reading and meaningful fodder for important conversation around gender roles and norms both abroad and at home.

Of particular interest on liberal arts campuses may be Ali Aldairy's reflections on the obligations of the intellectual class to civil society ("Coming Down From the Tower"). In an age when the value and meaning of both a college education for the individual student and the place of academia as a whole is being reconsidered, Mr. Aldairy makes a damning indictment against armchair academic rationalizing and pontificating, calling his learned brothers and sisters into the street to witness, record, and share the events shaping the world around us.

Finally, one of the broadest recurring themes which may strike a chord, particularly with traditional students on our campuses, is that of the impact of social media and mobile technology on civil discourse, social organizing, and political action. While Malek Sghiri was tortured in the same Interior Ministry prison as his father was decades before, his ability to immediately communicate his eventual freedom to his parents by cellphone changed the nature of his isolation and his family's experience of his disappearance. When Yasmine El Rashidi could think of no other way to impact the events happening around her in Cairo, she created a Facebook page to communicate directly with her fellow citizens and the rest of the world. With state media and his academic colleagues rationalizing brutal governmental repression of broadly peaceful, pluralistic demonstrations for democratic reform in the Kingdom of Bahrain, Ali Aldairy's running commentary on Twitter provided a painfully honest and direct view of the revolutionary experience from the ground. In her introduction, Yazbek suggests that writing is now different in the 21st century, in part because of the devices and tools which make it so immediate, accessible, and democratic. While the text does not go on to directly engage her point, it is clear that what the world now knows of the Arab Spring would be dramatically different without the presence of these technologies and outlets, if the Spring had happened at all.

Challenges

All but two works, Yazbek's introduction and Safa Al Ahmad's "Wishful Thinking" about societal pressure and political stagnation in Saudi Arabia, have been translated either from Arabic or French. The translations are largely successful, with many of the works (especially those from the Arabic) having an almost lyrical quality. That said, no translation is perfect, and the clunky, awkward moments of this book are occasionally exacerbated by lackluster editing. For thoughtful faculty and instructors, this shouldn't pose a serious challenge, but should be considered when deciding upon what a reasonable timeline might be for reading and understanding in preparation for discussion and analysis.

A more difficult issue is presented by the lack of overall context provided to ground the individual narratives for readers unfamiliar with at least the broad strokes of the Arab Spring and the years of colonial and post-colonial modern

history which preceded it. Ghania Mouffok's eloquent but dense discussion on the cycle of revolution and oppression in Algeria really only makes sense if the reader has some sense of that nation's long and troubled history with France. Mohamed Mesrati's reflection on growing up in Libya assumes a certain understanding of Colonel Gaddafi's "revolutionary" rise to power.

These challenges do, however, present some excellent opportunities for cross-departmental cooperation. A crash course in modern Arab history by senior history, political science, or international relations students would provide a much-needed setting within which to situate the events described within the text. A frank presentation around the interactions among gender roles, cultural norms, tribalism, and political influence in the Arab world would add depth and meaning to discussions about the role of women and minority groups in the ongoing revolution. A conversation with the economics department on the power and influence of oil-producing states and how oil impacts Western engagement with these nations would shed light onto how and why the United States and its allies have interacted with this part of the world.

Verdict and Recommendation

This is a complex work with many layers and themes, meriting thought and discussion on America's college and university campuses. However, limited as it is by a lack of contextual content to provide a setting within which to appreciate and understand these powerful works, the book becomes largely ineffectual. Frankly, parts of it can read like fiction to a sheltered Western audience and could easily be taken as such without a broader awareness of the people, places, and events which frame these stories. For this reason, I cannot make a broad endorsement of this text as part of a general new-student reading list. That said, it provides an important look into recent history and wide-ranging cultural forces which continue to shape our world and that our students should be exposed to. For residential campuses with strong collaboration among their English, communication, and social sciences departments or for first-year programs in international relations, world history, communication and media studies, cultural studies, or political science, I hope faculty will take up the challenge of engaging students in this important, powerful work.