MENDEL, Miloš: *Arabské jaro. Historické a kulturní pozadí událostí na Blízkém východě* [The Arab Spring. Historical and Cultural Background of Events in the Middle East] Praha: Academia, 2015. 349 p. (In Czech) ISBN 978-80-200-2474-9

Recently, the Arab world has been swept by an unprecedented wave of chaos, penetrating all aspects of the old and overturning decades-old convictions, in which concepts and practices have intermixed to spawn activism and debate over what is destructive and what is constructive. This has happened in a way that has catapulted all factions into the fray in hopes of prevailing, driven by the desire to exploit this historic opportunity, which might never recur ï at least not in the foreseeable future. Hence, what is occurring is a type of multidimensional collapse and failure of all policies ï stemming from customs or laws ï that had governed the region for more than fifty years. The earth has been split asunder by the emergence of a new seeding, still barely formed, fraught with danger and fear, yet which marks an historic turning point of reconciliation between the private and the global. For the first time, the Arabs have taken the initiative to act on the global stage, with repercussions for all humanity, manifesting their refusal to remain on the receiving end and merely respond to stressors coming from all sides and directions. The current globalised movement and its concomitant campaigns for liberty, democracy and the overthrow of autocratic, corrupt and dictatorial regimes is merely one facet of globalisation, in which events appear to be possessed of a central tendency ï the hidden and manifest aspects of which appear in attempts to channel its dynamics across different levels, in the violent birth of an Arab revolutionary movement.

Since the end of the cold war the Arab world has been subject to a massive and unprecedented process of ñcreative destructionò. Despite its highly pernicious effects at numerous levels, including the distortion of political life and the stark polarisation and increasing disparities between rich and poor, creative destruction is the instrument of choice in the process of globalisation run by the major Western powers, and functions in place of more costly direct military interventions, but can be used to serve similar ends. These powers engage in trafficking in protection, and American policies impose international axes conflicting by design for the purposes of managing their concerns whether such be through playing off political rivals against one another or running low-intensity wars that serve vested interests or grander imperial designs.

Western and most of the Arab media have understated the socio-economic factors behind the various mass uprisings in different Arab countries. Focus has been placed on the demand for political freedom and the ousting of corrupted dictators. The demand for greater social justice and a different developmental model had been largely ignored in most cases. For Western media, it was only natural that values of political freedom which were part of the revolutionary slogans should be emphasised, on the consideration that such represents a virtuous Western influence that animated the Arab revolts against tyranny and the deprivation of human rights. For pan-Arab media largely owned and managed by Saudi wealth, joining the chorus of condemnation of corrupted dictators originating from the military establishment in various Arab republics was intended to make monarchy to be looked upon as a regime that cares for its people. In fact, both Western and pan-Arab media avoided discussion in any depth of socio-economic issues that caused the uprisings of large masses of people for whom poverty and marginalisation prevent them aspiring to priority or individual political liberties and freedoms. These masses that emerged in huge numbers to demonstrate together with other more well-to-do social strata of the population were first and foremost motivated by the need to improve their socio-economic situation and gain access to decent employment opportunities.

For Western media and decision-makers emphasising the political demands for democracy and human rights almost exclusively permitted escaping the political discussion of the negative socio-economic effects of implementing neo-liberal economic prescriptions and recipes that Arab countries have been following over the last decades under the powerful influence of the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank and the European Union. IMF annual reports on Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Syria and other Arab countries have shown a significant degree of optimism and approval of progresses realised in these countries thanks to the drive for liberalisation. These reports have emphasised a number of issues including the improvement in fundamental macro-economic variables (inflation, budget deficit, balance of payment deficit); the positive developments of local capital markets; institutional modernisation in terms of market liberalisation (free trade, free flow of capital, central bank reform, privatisation and the reduction of the size of the public sector); and improvement in banking market performance.

These reports on the Middle East and North Africa analysed the lack of productivity and economic diversification or the moderate gross domestic product annual growth rates as being due exclusively to the need to deepen the neo-liberal reform drive. In their view, Arab states should increase labour flexibility and should not adhere to overvalued currencies so that their exports might be more dynamic. Government-funded social protection networks should be rationalised to only target exclusively the poorest strata of the population and thereby reduce the burden of state subsidies and the percentage of budget deficit in relation to the GDP. No one within the Western donor community would have anticipated that revolts would erupt in the Arab world due in large part to deteriorating socio-economic conditions, which were neither properly monitored nor addressed.

What was actually happening in terms of real economy in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia,

Yemen, Bahrain and Oman was out of their respective fields of vision. In spite of many studies by Arab economists indicating the deteriorating living conditions in rural areas along with the development and proliferation of shanty towns on the outskirts and suburbs of Arab cities, and despite available data on the burgeoning unemployment crisis and brain-drain detrimental to the productivity of the real economies, Western attention has remained focused exclusively on macro-economic balances and liberalisation drives according to neo-liberal ideology. The recent economic history of the Arab world is one of an increasingly negative model of bad growth to which few have yet paid attention which largely explains the vital socio-economic dimension of the Arab revolts. It is under this model that corruption has flourished and that unhealthy links were created between the business establishment and the political establishment. Complete silence prevailed with regard to this phenomenon in the media as well as in academic research communities along with the above reports.

In Egypt, it was the example of the Tunisian uprisings that emboldened Egyptians to break their own ñbarrier of fearò. Religious and sectarian differences have never been pronounced or a serious matter of contention in modern Egypt, and therefore Muslim and Christian Egyptians alike joined the uprisings in Ta^lrīr Square from the outset. Likewise, the protests were peaceful in spite of antagonism by the security forces. Unlike those forces loyal to President ^lusnī Mubārak, the Egyptian army initially remained neutral ï refusing to put down the demonstrations by force ï before subsequently siding with the revolt of the people. The confluence of these factors ï as in the case of Tunisia, albeit on a significantly greater scale of magnitude ï served to topple the regime in less than three weeks. The changes and their importance in Egypt are even more remarkable given the size of the countryôs population, the largest in the Arab world. If the Tunisian model suggested that the co-incidence of the four factors constituted a powerful force for change, the Egyptian model suggested this on a truly vast scale.

It is well-known that the first offshoots of the ñArab springò in Tunisia and Egypt had nothing in common with the manifestation of Islamic fundamentalism which had been keenly watched in the West since 11 September 2001. The events in the squares did not present images of bearded fanatics calling for jihad against the West and burning American flags. It was a movement of common people who demanded freedom and democracy, not jihad. The fact that through elections the Islamists came to power in several Arab countries is not surprising, as they had for many years formed the best organised opposition against a totalitarian, secular rule. Their success could not be attributed to an increased religiosity of society either. The credit for this goes to the working charity networks which helped people in cases when the West directed governments did not want or could not. Moreover, some of the Arab religious parties (Ḥamās in Ghaza, Ḥizballāh in Lebanon, the Movement of Muqtadā ṣadr in Iraq) are using more patriotic than religious rhetoric. When the ñArab springò came, the people did not have many possibilities to choose.

After many books of different standard and value on our book market lastly appeared a work which presents an objective and well-researched analysis of causes of socio-political movements in the Arab world. Its author, notable Czech Arabist and specialist in Islam, long standing research fellow at the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences and university teacher at Masaryk University in Brno, associate professor Dr. Miloġ Mendel, has according to his scientific results and pedagogical practice, every qualification to express the given complex of problems objective standpoints. His book is divided into several well chosen parts: 1. Introductory notes; 2. Historical preconditions of the ñArab springò; 3. Religious identity of the Arabs; 4. The ñArab springò in different countries; 5. Final notes.

Keeping in mind that a work of this type cannot answer every question it suggests, it succeeded in clarifying several less-known connections of the following development and it gives a sound basis for further reading. The democracy is an institutional framework which needs many building stones: independent judicature, rule of law, existence of civilian and political institutions, civil liberties, free general elections and watchfulness of a liberal society. The culture in Arab societies has not been shaping in conditions of free exchange of views. Its tendency to embrace the tradition without critical scrutiny could not lead to the acceptance of different views and values. Undoubtedly, also the failure of authoritarian secular Arab national revolutionary regimes contributed heavily to this situation (pp. 42 ī 43). These limiting factors are necessary to keep in mind for the future for they could hinder the road to democracy.

The book is furnished with useful final notes and a reliable register. Although the bibliography is limited to a list of selected works, it shows a creative and wide-ranging use of primary and secondary sources and can serve both historians and those interested in history as a sufficient guide. The reader finishes this substantial book with a firm grasp of the main tendencies of the socio-political development. The author has put together a fascinating account of continuity and change and his book is a significant contribution to the contemporary history of Middle East and North Africa. It is likewise an excellent stimulus for Czech and Slovak students of Islamic history as well as for interested readers.

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