The New Arabs, by Juan Cole

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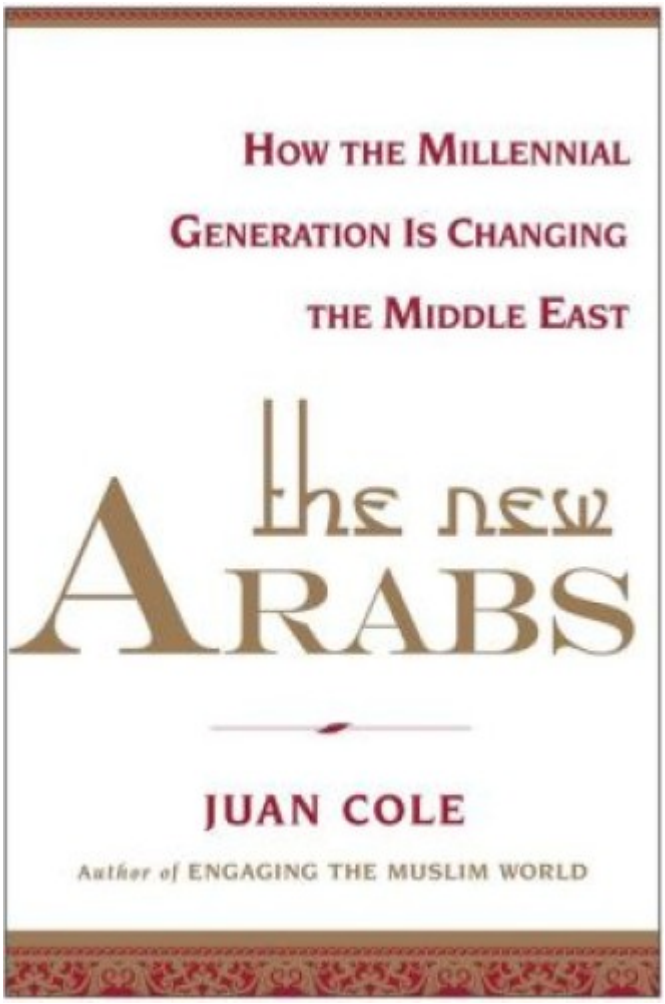
In Review



The New Arabs

By Juan Cole
Simon & Schuster

January 2011. “Mubarak next,” said one of our church security guards when news reached us that autocrat Ben Ali had fled Tunisia for safety in Saudi Arabia. The guard was only half joking. I had been working in Egypt for eight years by that time,

serving as the rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in the southern part of Cairo.

The week the revolution began in Egypt I started monitoring the Facebook site "We are all Khaled Said," dedicated to a young Egyptian man arrested for no apparent reason and brutally murdered by police the previous summer. Under emergency law in Egypt this could happen to anyone. A few days after the first Tahrir Square protest, I came out of our Friday morning worship service to find my cell phone texting and Internet connection disabled. The government had severed communications countrywide, hoping to prevent the spread of revolutionary crowds. Instead more people flooded into the streets; momentum was building.

Downtown, violence escalated as riot police subdued peaceful protesters with tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets. Later an Egyptian friend told me he had helped carry off nine people killed that day, one shot in the head by a sniper just yards away from him while he stood his ground, expecting to die as bullets sprayed round his feet.

The next morning I drove to church to check on things there. A burned-out police truck and several army tanks had taken the place of the riot police. Our usual 24/7 crew of armed and plainclothes police had shrunk to just one man. He greeted me apprehensively, handed over his set of keys to the church property, and said goodbye. I never saw him again.

Several days later I spoke briefly with a Muslim man who lived in the old Christian section of Cairo. Learning that I worked with a church, he proudly told me that he and his neighbors were protecting the churches there from looters, knowing that many Coptic churches contained gold and silver from ancient times. Throughout the revolution many Christians and Muslims stood side by side despite counterrevolution thugs' attempts to fuel religious discord. A symbolic painting of a cross and crescent embracing soon decorated a brick wall near our home.

In *The New Arabs*, renowned blogger and Middle East expert Juan Cole tells the backstory of these fluid events in Egypt, accessibly exploring them in the context of their cultural setting. His conclusions are optimistic yet grounded in realism. When he studied in Cairo as a young adult, Cole learned Arabic, and in the years since he has developed relationships with networked movements of young people over countless cups of sugared tea. He discusses a variety of underlying reasons for Middle Eastern revolutions—one being the youth bulge in population, which has

created Depression-era rates of unemployment among educated and uneducated people alike and led to idleness and despair at a bleak future for young people between the ages of 15 and 35. Cole voices their frustrations, political aspirations, divergent opinions, and dreams and relates how they rejected censorship and risked arrest, police brutality, and torture. He narrates these stories in historical context, filling in the details with information gleaned from embassy reports, Wikileaks, books, journals, and myriad news sources.

Cole does not group all young Arabs into a single all-encompassing generalization, although he primarily considers left-liberal youth living in towns and cities who share a preference for horizontal models of organization rather than a hierarchy of centralized leadership. “In societies dominated by police states for decades,” he writes, “these millennials made new social and media spaces in which their demands could be voiced and small steps could be taken toward achieving them.”

Whereas earlier generations may have refused to engage with certain kinds of groups, these youth are wired into interactive networks with horizontal organization that take an inclusive rather than a sectarian approach. Whereas their parents may see information consumption as a private or individual pursuit, these youth thrive on interactive group experiences via Internet forums, chat rooms, and blogging. Anonymity has provided an especially valuable vehicle for the emergence of young Arab women’s voices. Information is also disseminated via street chants, word of mouth, and announcements from mosque minarets. In Egypt the stage was set for revolution.

Cole focuses on Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya in this book because their stories share many similarities: each country saw the deposing of an autocrat whose power otherwise would probably have been passed down to another family member. But he takes time to discuss other countries in the region as well. Although their stories remain in motion, Cole argues for an optimistic long-term vision in which the youth who have spoken recently will be heard from again when they have more opportunities to shape politics directly. He sums things up adeptly in his book’s last line: “There will be no more republican monarchies. This generation of New Arabs has shaken a complacent, stagnant, and corrupt status quo and forever changed the world.”

It is too soon to pronounce judgment on any emerging development in the Middle East. Our own country also struggled through periods of violence and despair after it

had produced a supposedly just Constitution on paper. In Egypt torture continues even though it is now forbidden on paper, but small steps are being made toward recognizing the rights of women and children. A verbally declared all-inclusive Egypt seems to be embracing Christian and Muslim alike, but it restricts freedom of the press and shows no tolerance for the Muslim Brotherhood and for those aligned with Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, who unfortunately led too autocratically. It is a complicated scene, and Cole doesn't brush over the complications.

Cole observes that Arab youth tend to be leaning toward a more secular or liberal definition of Islamic faith in their lives and that they tend to define themselves nationally, politically, and culturally rather than religiously. His admiration for these youth is evident. He credits them for kicking off a long intergenerational argument and for laying down markers for the future of the region, though setbacks as well as advances are to be expected as the years unfold. As Cole points out, revolution is sudden, but reform takes time.