

Book Review: Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya and Tunisia After the Arab Spring by Ibrahim Fraihat

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In Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya and Tunisia After the Arab Spring, Ibrahim Fraihat examines three countries grappling with political transition post-revolution, looking at how each has sought to establish a new social contract amidst the potential revival of unresolved tensions. While Hesham Shafick questions the limitations of the book's overarching emphasis on western-centric conflict resolution literature, this is nonetheless a seminal reference text for students looking at the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

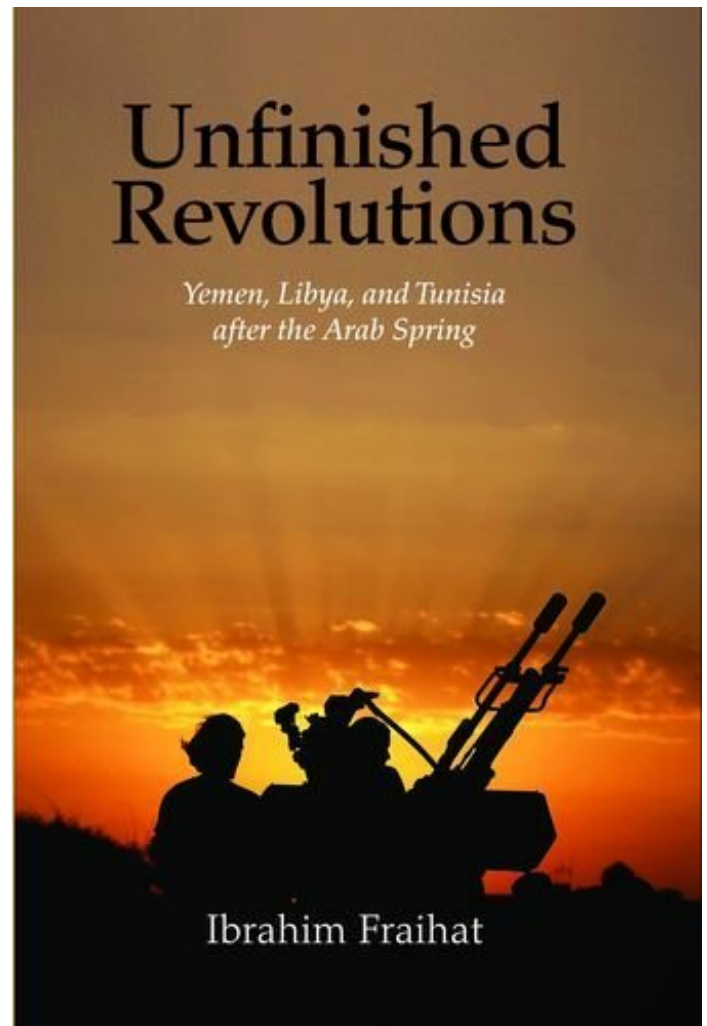
***Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya and Tunisia After the Arab Spring*. Ibrahim Fraihat. Yale University Press. 2016.**

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Literature on revolution typically highlights the double-edged consequences of overthrowing established tyrannies. Ibrahim Fraihat's book, *Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya and Tunisia After the Arab Spring*, begins with a diagnosis of this phenomenon: 'The transition process that follows regime change [...] can revive old, sometimes forgotten, issues.' As the social contract terminates, all issues that were resolved, manipulated or coercively shutdown by the *ancien régime* are reactivated as pressing problems on the political stage. National identity, state structure and modes of economic production are no longer givens, but rather questions.

Fraihat studies this situation in three recent empirical cases: Yemen, Libya and Tunisia. In the Yemeni case, the overthrow of the unification leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh, brought into question the (dis)unity of the Yemeni nation-state. In the Libyan case, the termination of the tribal leaders' loyalty to the former tyrant, Muammar El-Qaddafi, incited tribal factionalism, splitting the nation into many autonomous, self-claimed and self-governing territorialised factions. As for Tunisia, the relatively smooth transition of power ensured national coherence, which makes it qualify as a case of 'success' in Fraihat's terms. One of the reasons for its temporary 'success', however, is the persistence of the old regime's institutions (the army, police, judiciary, etc) despite the revolution against them, which puts their domestic legitimacy under jeopardy and makes their persistence more or less a matter of time.

The post-revolution Tunisian state thus is also struggling to reacquire its monopoly over national representation and the punitive use of force, but so far more 'peacefully' and 'silently' than Libya and Yemen.



In all three cases, post-revolution states are attempting, with variant degrees of failure and success, to offer and enforce a new 'social contract' representing the 'national will' to replace the overthrown. Accordingly, Fraihat proposes a threefold prognosis: 1) bringing different factions together to collectively deliberate the 'national will'; 2) delineating and prioritising its components and articulating the 'social contract' through which it is institutionalised; and 3) enacting a state structure that represents this national will.

The first point requires a throwback to *past* grievances that prevent different factions from sitting together on the negotiation table. The second builds on the first to formulate the contours that represent the collective national *present*, while the third is concerned with the institutions that serve the aspired *future*. Collectively, those steps shall bring about a national reconciliation, in which past grievances are resolved through transitional justice; the present social contract is reconstructed to accommodate the widest possible variety of national interests and actors; and the aspired future is eventually headed towards by means of collective transition, coordinated through a legitimate nation-state.



Image Credit: Demonstrations in Al Bayda, Libya, 2011 (CCO)

But the devil is in the detail. How can 'transitional justice' be achieved that neither disappoints the victims nor antagonises the punished? How can a reasonable consensus be achieved without excluding outlying actors? And how can the balance between the variety of actors' 'transitional goals' be determined? There are no universal answers to such questions. They rather ought to be studied on their own case-specific terms.

Acknowledging the aforementioned case specificity, Fraihat proceeds empirically, interviewing 'hundreds of national figures, including senior government officials, heads of political parties and civil society organisations, militia leaders, tribal leaders, members of displaced communities, scholars, journalists, former regime loyalists and representatives of a number of international organisations' in order to frame the contours of the studied conflicts.

As anticipated, the responses he received were far from consensual. However, the variety of raised issues, involved actors and aspired reforms can still be mapped in around twenty points for each country (see Table 1, 69-70). This mapping, I believe, is the book's main contribution. Nonetheless, it still cannot determine how the 'balance' between those different issues, actors and aspirations can be attained.

The author instead drew on conventional conflict resolution theoretical frameworks to work out priorities and/or appropriate balances. This was rather disappointing, for one because it contradicted the author's initial premise of case specificity. But, more importantly, it also extends the western-centric tradition of conflict resolution literature to the studied cases. More specifically, Fraihat takes for granted the aspiration for a stable nation-state as a 'common denominator' between the conflicting actors: an assumption that does not pertain to the cases at hand on two main grounds.

Firstly, it assumes the pre-existence of a homogeneous nation, in which national reconciliation reinstates the 'normal condition' of national unity. This does not apply to the former colonies of the Middle East, which were arbitrarily divided into non-homogeneous nation-states by exogenous imperialist forces. In addition, both Yemen and Libya of today were brought into their contemporary existence through the coercive projects of the overthrown tyrants. The problem of national unity in those cases, thus, is not an offspring of the conflict to be 'resolved', but a genuine sociopolitical question to be addressed on its own historical terms.

Second, it takes for granted the conflicting actors' aspirations for a legitimate state. This comes from a western-centric understanding of the state as the optimal form of governance. In the studied cases, it might be the case that some of the conflicting factions do aspire to one form or another of state rule. But it also might be that those actors aspire for tribal and/or militaristic political goals that are beyond the domain of the state. The dominance of either of the two possibilities can only be verified empirically, an endeavour Fraihat's empirical study overlooks.

Putting the concept of the nation-state at the heart of the proposed reconciliation is therefore problematic. A closer analysis that takes into consideration the novelty, inevitability and exogeneity of contemporary Middle Eastern nation-states may suggest that the roots of contemporary conflicts in the region (tribalism, factionalism, illegitimate states, etc) are more 'normal' than they might appear through the lens of western conflict resolution literature. This would surely have an impact on the proposed 'way out' of such conflicts, redefining those conflictual notions as national 'questions' rather than national problems or crises. Whether they are 'questions' or 'problems' is itself an empirical inquiry that ought to be studied on its own case-specific terms.

Although the book deftly maps the indigenous actors' perceptions of the studied post-revolutionary conflicts, its proposed resolutions were not equally indigenous. Its dependence on western-centric conflict resolution methods without adjustment to the cases' peculiar (colonial and postcolonial) histories leads to empirically unverified (mis)understandings of the involved actors' aspired transitions. To achieve more indigenous 'resolutions', the author could complement his empirical interrogation of the contemporary conflicts with an equally empirical interrogation of the actors' indigenous understanding of those conflicts and their desired resolutions. This can hardly be achieved without a 'throwback' that engages in depth with the history of nationalism and statism in the studied nation-states.

Notwithstanding such limitation, Fraihat's book remains a seminal empirical reference for students of the Arab uprisings, as well as a valuable theoretical review on the methods of conflict resolution. Its shortcoming, nonetheless, pertains to the link it unquestioningly aspires to establish between the two.

Hesham Shafick is a PhD candidate at Queen Mary, University of London (QMUL). Supervised by Kimberly Hutchings, his dissertation studies the genealogy of political violence against Islamists in Egypt. He previously studied at University College London, Washington College, University of California in Los Angeles and the American University in Cairo. He has also taught at the British University in Egypt. [Read more by Hesham Shafick.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

