

PREFACE

IN RETELLING any history of revolutions, the uprisings that spread through the Middle East in 2011 will remain watershed events. These uprisings toppled long-standing dictators, overturned entrenched interests, and unsettled authoritarian regimes in a measure and magnitude that took everyone by surprise—policy makers, intelligence agents, scholars, and even the protagonists themselves. Yet these revolts did not emerge from a vacuum. They had their precursors—in structural changes reflected in urban growth, demographic shifts and growing disparity, the formation of new political actors, and in ongoing everyday struggles that all merged into these revolutionary moments. A new Middle East may now be on the horizon, a Middle East informed not only by the actions of the elites, military men, or foreign intrigues but a region influenced by the ordinary people. Change is no longer an elusive concept “alien” to the region, as the dominant narratives would have us believe; tyrannical rules do fall; and people do matter. The revolutionary moment has shown how a previously excessive focus on Islam to explain political behavior and on elite politics to expound political reform did not take us very far in understanding the dynamics of the region. Elite politics has largely been subservient to the collective will of the subaltern groups. Certainly, Islam does occupy a significant place in the social dynamics of these societies, but not in the way that has been wished, perceived, or presented by the mainstream narratives. In truth, Islam is not only a mobilizing force deployed to push for change but also the subject of intense social struggle to define its place in society and politics.

Of course, it is easy to make claims in retrospect about prerevolutionary precursors. Indeed, it is a common practice of postrevolution scholarship to

read history backward, to project the outcome to the process, or to explain the revolution by weaving precursory narratives to fit the eventuality. But I believe that this book does not fall into this same trap. The first edition of *Life as Politics* was published in 2010, a year before the uprisings began. In the preface to that edition, I stated that the central theme of the book was agency and change in the Muslim Middle East. More specifically, the book focused on the configuration of sociopolitical transformation brought about by internal social forces, by collectives and individuals, and by the diverse ways in which the ordinary people—the subaltern, the urban dispossessed, Muslim women, the globalizing youth, and other urban grass roots—could strive to affect change in their societies. In refusing to exit from the social and political stage controlled by authoritarian states, their moral authority, and neoliberal economies, these groups discover and generate new spaces within which they can voice their dissent and assert their presence in pursuit of bettering their lives. As my work showed, ordinary people can change their societies through opportunities other than mass protests or revolutions; they can and do resort more widely to “nonmovements”—the collective endeavors of millions of non-collective actors, carried out in the main squares, backstreets, courthouses, and communities.

As the reception of the first edition coincided with the raging Arab uprisings, many commentators described the book as “prophetic,” “prescient,” and even as something that “predicted” the Arab revolutions. Whether or not the insights projected and the perspectives developed in the book could warrant these pronouncements will be left to the judgment of the reader. I have to admit that I could never have imagined the speed, scale, and ferocity of these monumental revolts as they began to unfold. What I hoped then, with the first edition, and hold now, with the publication of a second edition, is to examine some of the underlying social and political settings that may lead to revolutionary events. This book highlights how, during the last three decades or so, Middle Eastern societies have been transforming economic, social, cultural, and religious domains, and how these changes have been associated with and resulted in deep social cleavages and conflicts, generating social groups with demands, desires, and political subjectivities that the dictatorial regimes were unable to tackle. More significantly, perhaps, the book shows that the discontented subaltern groups—the poor, the youths, women, and the politically marginalized—do not sit around passively obeying the diktats of their police states, nor did they tie their luck to the verdict of destiny. Rather, they were

always engaged, albeit in mostly dispersed and disparate struggles in the immediate domains of their everyday life—in the neighborhoods, places of work, street corners, courthouses, communities, and in the private realms of taste, personal freedom, and preserving dignity. By engaging such social “non-movements,” they can take advantage of moments to turn misfortunes into advantage and, when the opportunity arises, shift their mostly quiet and individual struggles into audible and collective defiance.

This second edition is fully revised, updated, and extended. To take account of the Arab revolutions as well as Iran’s Green movement of 2009, I have added three new chapters (“Battlefield Tehran,” “The Green Revolt,” and “The Post-Islamist Reolutions”), extended others, retitled some, updated all, and restructured the organization of the volume. But the central spirit and the focus of the studies remain. This book is about the “art of presence,” the story of agency in times of constraints. The work constitutes the core of my reflections for the past decade or so on the social movements, nonmovements, and revolutions that are seen through the prism of historical specificity of the Muslim Middle East, yet insist on both critical and constructive engagement with the prevailing social theory. My hope is not only to produce rigorous empirical knowledge about social and political change in this complex region of the world but also to engage with and contribute to social theory in general.

What about the Arab Spring revolutions? I was and continue to remain explicit that revolutions could never be predicted, nor precisely planned to achieve desirable outcomes. Revolutions simply “happen.” But we, as political actors, can and often do imagine revolutions—we talk about, discuss, and even envisage the possibility of them happening or not happening, or the form they may or may not take. On this score, I have proposed that the Iranian experience of 1979 may well remain the first and last Islamic Revolution of our time, and that the historical conditions in the region were conducive for what might be termed “post-Islamist reolutions,” a mix of reformist and revolutionary trajectories. The current political upheavals in the region seem to exhibit a “refo-lutionary” character; one that may both constrain and open opportunities for the future of democracy in the Middle East.

