

Fathers and Sons: The Rise and Fall of Political Dynasty in the Middle East

By M.E. McMillan

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Reviewed by Ömer Aslan

A DECADE after 9/11, the Arab revolts gave a second impetus to scholarly interest in the Middle East. A plethora of books and other academic and popular pieces have been published in the last few years. McMillan's book, *Fathers and Sons*, gives the reader a fine, bird's eye view account of the Arab world's journey in particular and the Muslim world in general from the time of the Prophet. McMillan's work is a historical narrative of how and why the Arab world inherited a system of dynastic succession that is blatantly un-Islamic and how that path culminated in the Arab revolts. The book, more popular than academic, is unbiased in its perspective towards Muslims/Arabs and is especially easy to read and follow.

McMillan starts his narrative with the method of succession from one Guided Caliph to another. The convening of shura to decide the Caliph in the early period of "Rightly Guided Caliphs" contrasts starkly with the later period, when the method of consultation is abandoned for patrimonial rule. The consequence was that "the caliphate would no longer be a community of the faithful but a kingdom like any other" (p. 23). McMillan traces the history of militaries as the backbone of regimes in the modern Arab world to the period of Umayyad rule as well. It was "army officers wedding themselves to their rulers" that created the authoritarian stability in the region after the 1960s. The author reminds us that "this weld-



ing of a loyal army to an elite ruling family [during Muawiyah's rule during the Umayyad] became the bedrock of a political model" (p. 26).

The modern period since France's invasion of Egypt not only brought entirely new forms government such as kingdoms, which had never existed in the Arab world (p. 108), but also new ideologies such as nationalism, liberalism, and later socialism. The most critical of all was the adoption of the political language of Europe. This novelty forced invention of new Arabic words corresponding to new European concepts such as 'nation' and 'constitutionalism.' For in the classical periods, "theirs [the Arabs] was a world without borders of nationality or language" (p. 151). However, the making of new words was at times done at the expense of distorting the meanings of age-old concepts. The concept of ummah illustrates this point well. Since Arabic did not originally have a word to denote 'nation,' early Arab nationalists twisted the meaning of ummah to make it mean 'nation.' As Talal Asad pointed it out,

"The Islamic umma in the classical theological view is thus not an imagined community on a par with the Arab nation waiting to be politically unified but a theologically defined space enabling Muslims to practice the disciplines of din in the world...The fact that the expression umma 'arabiyya is used today to denote the 'Arab nation' represents a major

conceptual transformation by which umma is cut off from the theological predicates that gave it its universalizing power, and is made to stand for an imagined community that is equivalent to a total political society, limited and sovereign like other limited and sovereign nations in a secular (social) world.”¹

The concept of ‘national interests’ also started to captivate the ruling Arab elite’s minds as soon as they grabbed the thrones. They jealously held on to their power and privileges by the concept of ‘national interests’ despite all rhetoric of ‘Arabism.’ This explains why the so-called ‘Arab League’ was designed so that cooperation between Arab states in principle never contradicted another’s much-cherished state sovereignty. This ensured that “national interests always took precedence” (p. 108).

An important issue McMillan raises is the reign of illusory ‘stability’ in the Arab world from the 1970s onwards, after an era of coups in Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Algeria.² The author deserves credit here for underlining patronage, social policy, and power of coercion (p. 117-119) as factors contributing to the authoritarian status quo, instead of resorting to any cultural explanation such as Arab or Muslim exceptionalism. Bellin pointed to the role of coercive apparatus earlier: “the solution to the puzzle of Middle Eastern and North African exceptionalism lies less in absent prerequisites of democratization and more in present conditions that foster robust authoritarianism, specifically a robust coercive apparatus in these states.”³ Apart from these strategies, however, the new rulers, once-coup plotters such as Hafez Assad or Saddam Hussein, knew how to make their regimes coup-proof, a matter McMillan passes over. Once they took the helm, Assad and others like him used five measures to thwart coups: they exploited family, ethnic, and religious

loyalties for coup-critical positions; created parallel armed forces to check on the regular military; developed multiple internal security agencies to cross-check each other; fostered professionalism in the regular military; and allocated money for these purposes.⁴

Perhaps one of the most significant yet little studied aspects of Middle Eastern politics is the politics of prayer, meaning the relationship between religious institutions and state. Although such seminal religious institutions, such as the al-Azhar in Egypt and the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey, are controlled by the state, there are probably only a handful of systematic studies on trials and tribulations of that relationship over the last century. McMillan rightly broaches this subject towards the end of his book in a section entitled “Power and Prayer.” Prayer, especially the Friday prayer, has never been solely about serving or fulfilling one of their duties toward God for Muslims; it has also been a political act, a way of showing opposition or professing obedience. As the author points out, “in the days before mass media and digital communications, Friday prayer was where people swapped information and news” (p. 145). From the time of the Umayyads, when the Umayyad family exploited the potential of Friday prayer to curse the Fourth Caliph, the Prophet’s cousin Ali, to our modern times with the Arab peoples’ mobilization on “Friday of rage” and “Friday of anger,” the prayer has carried immense political potential. The potential of mass prayer has been tapped into so often by Egyptians, Tunisians, Syrians, and Libyans in the last three years that, McMillan tells us, a new Arabic proverb has been coined: “Arab dictators don’t like Fridays” (p. 156).

All in all, *Fathers and Sons*, free from the scholarly jargon, provides a succinct narrative of the Arab world that can be read in

one sitting. As such, it will help the general reader make better sense of the rise and fall of patrimonial rule in the Arab world and the dynamics of the Arab revolt.

Endnotes

1. Talal Asad, "Religion, Nation-State, Secularism," in Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (eds.), *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 197.
2. Hicham Bou Nassif, "Wedded to Mubarak: The Second

Careers and Financial Rewards of Egypt's Military Elite 1981-2011," *Middle East Journal* 67 (4), (Autumn 2013), p. 509; Eliezer Be'eri, "The Waning Of Military Coups In The Arab World," *Middle Eastern Studies* 18(1) (January 1982), p. 74; Mehran Kamrava, "Military Professionalization And Civil-Military Relations In The Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly* 115(1) (2000), p. 67

3. Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36(2) (January 2004), p. 143.
4. James T. Quinnlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security*, 24 (2) (Fall 1999), p. 133.

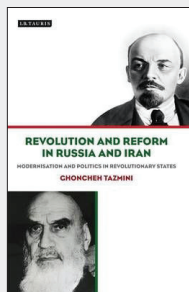
Revolution and Reform in Russia and Iran: Modernisation and Politics in Revolutionary States

By Ghoncheh Tazmini

New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012, 302 pages, ISBN 9781848855540.

Reviewed by David Ramin Jalilvand

IN HER comparative study, Ghoncheh Tazmini investigates the Russian revolution of 1917 and the 1979 Iranian revolution to identify patterns of continuity and change, including attempts at reform. At first, both revolutions might appear entirely different. In Russia, the Tsarist monarchy was replaced by socialism, whereas in Iran political Islam prevailed. However, Tazmini convincingly shows that both revolutions had related roots: the people's opposition to Western-inspired, autocratically enforced modernization that was endorsed by the Russian Tsars and Iranian Shahs. Moreover, in Vladimir Putin and Mohammad Khatami, she argues, both countries saw reformers with a similar outlook. By adopting beneficial Western practices without 'Westernizing' their countries, Putin and Khatami overcame the "antinomies of the past."



After the introduction, chapters two, three, and four discuss the experiences of modernization in Russia and Iran under the Romanov tsars and Pahlavi shahs. Both Peter the Great (in the 18th century) and Reza Shah (in the 20th century) sought to catch-up with developed European countries. To this end, they embarked on ambitious modernization programs, which were continued by their successors. In this context, Tazmini shows that the Russian and Iranian modernization programs only partially followed the European example. While embracing outward signs of modernity such as modern industries, state-society relations remained traditionally autocratic. Tazmini rightly grasps this as "modernization without modernity" in an attempt of "modernization from above." Modernization from above is described as a "double helix" of economic modernization on