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The levant express: the arab uprisings, human rights, and the future of the middle east

by Micheline Ishay, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2019, 352 pp., 21 \$ (hb), ISBN: 9780300215694

Gabriel Schwake

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city, the countryside, wildlife, the need to control pollution and serious concern has been shown towards growing population and increased consumption of finite resources of water, land and air. The book is a valuable and accessible resource for academicians and researchers of Environmental politics as it adds information to the existing body of knowledge by providing an Islamic perspective towards environmentalism and its relationship with humans thus challenging the stereotypical Western-centric perspective of contemporary Islamism as outdated and anti-modern. The book has provided enough information to clear the previously 'unknown' position of Islamist groups who have increasingly discussed environmental-related issues. In the contemporary prevailing atmosphere of Post 9/11 Islamophobia and neo-Orientalism, this book is a fine contribution to the debate over environmentalism and Islamism. The book is written with proof-based arguments in simple language that keeps the reader effectively engaged.

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The levant express: the arab uprisings, human rights, and the future of the middle east, by Micheline Ishay, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2019, 352 pp., 21 \$ (hb), ISBN: 9780300215694

In 'The Levant Express' Micheline Ishay guides us through a journey across the Middle East, exploring the aspirations of its people for human rights and democracy. Drawing on the train metaphor, Ishay, a distinguished professor specializing in international studies, political theory, and the history of human rights, illustrates the Arab Spring as an initial push for democracy that was disrupted, lost momentum, and ultimately transformed into a harsh Arab Winter, with ousted oppressive governments making way for even more repressive regimes. Ishay goes beyond the role of the critical scholar, delving into the investigation of how to redirect this derailed train onto its proper path, steering the region towards a future centred on human rights. According to Ishay, a significant factor in achieving this future lies in regional economic cooperation, which transforms the symbolic train into a tangible one, connecting the people and markets of the Middle East, and ultimately fostering prosperity and tolerance. Published merely a year before the Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco were signed, 'The Levant Express' forms a manifesto for peace in the Middle East in which economic perspectives transcended religious, ideological, and political conflicts, and eventually lead to human rights.

The book consists of three main parts. It first begins with the introduction of the concept of the Levant Express as a metaphor for the Arab Spring while conducting a comparison with former revolutionary movements throughout history, including those of 1848, 1947, 1968, 1970, and 1989. In Part 2, Ishay explores the decline of the Arab Spring, in what she defines as the derailment of the Levant Express. In Part 3, inspired by Roosevelt's New Deal, Ishay applies Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms (freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear) to the Middle East, arguing that the

utilization of the region's resources, like sun, sand, water, and shield would promote economic prosperity, interdependence, and security, and eventually ensure peace, stability, and human rights.

Ishay's book is very well-written and a pleasure to read, and the ability to convey such a complex issue in a coherent way is worthy of admiration. Ishay expresses remarkable acquaintance with the history of the region as well as in-depth knowledge of its contemporary culture, with references both to canonical texts such as the writings of Ibn Khaldun and recent hip-hop songs from Tunisia and Egypt. This makes the book an approachable text without losing its academic credibility, a virtue which should not be underestimated. The approachability of this book is enhanced by Ishay's capability to develop the book's arguments through the depiction of her personal experiences in the region, which she was talented and wise enough to avoid portraying in the fashion of 'Humboldt and the natives'. This is in line with the remarkably innovative and thought-provoking assessments that Ishay offers, which are supported by original perspectives concerning the obstacles confronting the Middle East. Collectively, these qualities make 'The Levant Express' a book that holds appeal for both academics and general readers, particularly those with a keen interest in Middle Eastern politics. For this alone, the book is more than just worth reading.

Alongside the fact that the book is a clear and informative text, there are several issues that are hard to ignore. While the book briefly mentions the way in which the discourse of enlightenment, democratization, and technology was inseparable from European colonization, Ishay then proceeds with quite a similar approach of enlightening the Middle East, 'if they only let us', and disregards how the disdain towards 'democracy' and 'human rights' derives from its historical coupling with Western colonization. Not surprisingly, the post-colonial discourse is significantly missing, with Fanon being cited only due to his psychiatric analysis of colonized subjects and Said barely mentioned. Correspondingly, despite the recurrent references to European enlightenment, its critique is hardly mentioned. By ignoring major works like Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer is mentioned in a different context on page 201),¹ and drawing inspiration from Roosevelt's famous 1941 Four Freedoms Speech, the text leaves the reader wondering what makes this book different from previous Western texts on the Middle East, if it disregards the additional layers promoted by post-war critical theorists. Ishay is very careful not to come across as orientalist, and throughout the book she is able to do so, quite skilfully, acknowledging the usual biases that accompany foreign scholars in the Middle East. However, in the recurrent accounts of the evenings with her shisha-smoking students in an Emirati palace, Ishay falls into the trap that she proficiently avoided, limiting the fresh and uncondescending perspective the book promised to deliver while ignoring the fact that these palaces are perhaps one of the main reasons why the 'Levant Express' was derailed.

In one of his last books, anthropologist David Graeber wrote 'I don't usually like putting policy recommendations in my books' because if 'an author is critical of existing social arrangements, reviewers will often ... search the text until they find something that looks like a policy suggestion, and then act as if that is what the book is basically about.'² While I usually follow Graeber's suggestions, in this case I would need to make an exemption and discuss the vision for the Middle East Ishay wants to promote, which is based on reciprocal relationship between economic prosperity and human rights. This is indeed promising, and one could easily imagine a scenario where economic cooperation leads to peace,

¹Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 2007).


²David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (London: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2018), p. 269–270.

tolerance, and mutual understanding. Yet this privatized peace', as defined by Daniel Gutwein,³ eventually serves the economic interests of existing elites, and if human rights are good because they are good for business, then they endure only as long as they remain good for business. Thus, while it would be unwise to dismiss the significance of the Abraham Accords, it is challenging to identify how they actively address the issue of human rights beyond their emphasis on economic collaboration and shared investments. The inclusion of Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara, a fundamental component of the accord, serves as a telling example of this, while Israel's gestures to the Palestinians have largely faded into obscurity.

Ultimately, there is a curiosity about the significant emphasis placed on the UAE and Israel within a book that discusses the rejuvenation of the Arab Spring's ideals, mainly as these two contexts had little to do with the wave of uprisings that swept across the Middle East in 2011. Nevertheless, perhaps Ishay's experiences in these contexts, for whom the Arab Spring was constantly accompanied by utilitarian questions in the sort of 'is this good for us or not?', explain the vision that the book seeks to promote. Respectively, while discussing her interview with Israeli Minister of Transport, Yisrael Katz, and his vision for a railway connection between Israel and the Gulf (147), Ishay does not even attempt to peel off the cynicism. This 'game changer', as defined by Katz, is not even remotely connected to the ideals of human rights and democracy as the focus remains on the eventual transport of goods, mainly crude oil, from the Arabian desert to the 'West', just as during the British Mandate. The privatized peace of economic prosperity and interdependence has therefore the potential to become the farce that repeats the tragedy of European colonization, reproducing the societal and economic circumstances that the protesters of 2011 sought to change.

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Exchange ideologies: commerce, language, and patriarchy in Preconflict

Aleppo, by Paul Anderson, New York, Cornell University Press, 2023, 216 pp., 29.95 \$ (ppk), ISBN: 9781501768309

Several early explanations for Syria's conflict emphasized the deleterious effects of the preceding decade of neo-liberal style market reforms in fostering the societal discontent that sparked the uprisings. Materialist explanations contrasted with religious ones that naively and reductively attributed the conflict's trajectory to the explosion of simmering sectarian hatreds. For the most part, however, materialist analysis of the pre-2011 period focused on structural economic changes (defined as neoliberal) that produced a path towards revolution. Economic analyses of pre-2011 Syria sought to explain the uprising, rather than understanding that period on its own terms and in how economic change was experienced, absorbed, enacted,

³Daniel Gutwein, 'Some Comments on the Class Foundations of the Occupation', *Monthly Review*, 2006, <https://mronline.org/2006/06/16/some-comments-on-the-class-foundations-of-the-occupation/>.