

MAGHREB

Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring, by Michael J. Willis. London: Hurst & Co, 2012. \$35.

Reviewed by Jason Pack and James Roslington

Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring by Dr. Michael Willis is a single-volume guide to the post-independence high politics of the three core countries of the Maghreb. Willis — currently director of the prestigious Middle East Centre at St. Antony's College, Oxford University — effortlessly guides the reader through scholarly debates in the existing English-language literature on North Africa. Intense cross-referencing between chapters, an excellent index, and extensive endnotes make this an ideal reference volume. The paucity of coverage of the rich French-language scholarship and the absence of Arabic sources can be said to be the book's primary drawback. It is also part of the work's unique strength: its accessibility. Despite its dense, detail-filled narrative, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb* remains approachable for the lay reader and fulfills its primary aim — the creation of an up-to-date reference work on contemporary North Africa tailored specifically for the concerns of an Anglo-American audience.

The book's novel contribution lies in its broad and comparative approach. It builds upon the magisterial overviews of the Maghreb's contemporary history which

were in vogue after independence, but which have appeared with ever-decreasing frequency in recent years (Barbour 1959; Berque 1962; Entelis 1980; Zartmann and Habeeb 1993; Vermeren 2004). *Politics and Power* is particularly timely as its broad focus links the apparent pre-2011 "stagnation" and increasingly authoritarian modes of political control to the outbreak of the Arab Spring.

Willis' broad, almost bird's-eye, view underlies his description of the divergent paths of post-independence state-building: revolution and populist military rule in Algeria; elite secularism and one-party rule in Tunisia; monarchy and political patronage in Morocco. He asserts that, by the 1970s, governance strategies in all three states had paradoxically converged upon ever-increasing centralization directed by a powerful individual. In narrating these processes, Willis provocatively emphasizes the passivity of ordinary people. "It is noticeable that, in discussing the political evolution of the Maghreb ... little mention has been made of the ordinary populations ... [who] were essentially peripheral ... they played little or no role in either the struggles for power or in the construction of the post-independence state — both processes being ... the preserve of the elites" (p. 70). This view may arise from the real deficiency in the existing literature concerning popular participation, but it strikes us as unlikely to reflect the complex reality during the rough-and-tumble grab for power at the local level to fill the vacuum left by Spain and France.

Politics and Power is a refreshingly old-fashioned book. It appears calculated to strike a blow against the post-colonial focus on cultural studies which has dominated campuses in recent decades, culminating in the "marginalization" of diplomatic history. Willis resoundingly reaffirms the value of high politics and grand narrative for area studies. Consider his treatment of the evolution of Maghrebi state structures: the state was traditionally weak under the Ottomans and the Moroccan Sultan; it was the European colonial powers which created functional, modernizing, yet oppressive governance; "the comprehensive and pervasive nature of colonial control meant that its effects would not cease with the withdrawal of the last Eu-

ropean troops and administrators” (p. 35); in the post-colonial period, the indigenous French-educated elites inherited, maintained, and buttressed these structures “not just out of necessity but in full consciousness of the fact that the colonial structures had been designed with the specific objective of establishing exclusive political control of the country” (p. 64); this process culminated in the hyper-centralization of political and economic power leading to the backlash of the Arab Spring.

Willis’ comparative approach draws parallels between the Maghreb countries that usually pass unnoticed. The role of the military in Algerian politics is well-known, but Willis discusses the subterranean role of the army in Tunisia and Morocco, explaining how all three armies are in fact continuations of the colonial state. Similarly, the efforts to control the rise of Amazigh (Berber) consciousness through repression (Algeria) or concession (Morocco) is also widely appreciated. Yet, Willis underlines the different social positions of Algeria’s Kabyles, who form an elite French-educated group, as opposed to the non-urban Amazigh in Morocco, who rely on the King to champion their cause against their elite urban Arab Nationalist opponents. Willis’ treatment of the evolution of the “Berber Question” paints the importance of the growing sense of a transnational Amazigh identity — a phenomenon still limited to an activist minority but which likely will play a determinative role in the future politics of the region. Although this comparative regional aspect of the book remains its defining feature, the amount of space devoted to Libya and Mauritania is miniscule. Their internal developments are treated only in as much as they affected key regional issues such as the Western Sahara or the Arab Maghreb Union.

Willis affirms the close linkage between politics and economics, particularly its causative role in the Arab Spring. One would perhaps like to have read more on the specific impact of the global economic crisis and increase in food prices from 2008, but Willis cogently explores the failed neo-liberal reforms of Tunisia; the hydrocarbon dependence of Algeria; and the overweening role of the royal house in the Moroccan

economy. He explains the commonality of the Washington Consensus privatizations which were progressively adopted by all three countries to combat the failure of earlier *dirigiste* socialism.

The chapters on regional and international politics explore the roots of the Western Sahara conflict and how its lingering effects have prevented attempts at regional integration. Even though he is the King Mohammed VI Fellow in Moroccan and Mediterranean Studies, Willis’ academic integrity is beyond question. He does not hesitate to criticize Moroccan handling of the Western Saharan issue while unveiling exactly how Moroccan policy toward the conflict is specifically calculated to appease nationalist/populist sensibilities and the military. Refusing to pull his punches, Willis also demonstrates how the post-9/11 American and European focus on counter-terrorism and immigration impeded democratization in the Maghreb.

Few are likely to be able to match the breadth, depth, and honesty of *Politics and Power in the Maghreb*. Although readers may pick up the book expecting detailed insights into the developments of the Arab Spring, Willis is at his best when showing how the differing nature of the independence struggles in the three countries led to the unique characteristics of each post-colonial regime. In Morocco, the monarchy’s nationalist credentials allowed it to marginalize urban competitors and enshrine royal patronage and feckless multipartyism. In Tunisia, the mass support and organization of the neo-Destour allowed Bourguiba to put forth modernization programs which would increase the personalization of the state. In Algeria, the military coalitions required to defeat the French led to intense infighting and later a corporatist state run by the military. Unlocking the intricacies of these historical processes allows the reader to grapple with the origins and consequences of the Arab Spring.

For the foreseeable future, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb* is likely to remain the definitive reference volume for policymakers, academics, and students alike.

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