

**ROCK THE CASBAH: RAGE AND REBELLION ACROSS  
THE ISLAMIC WORLD<sup>1</sup>**

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*For a decade, the outside world was so preoccupied with its “war on terrorism” that it gave little credence to efforts among Muslims to deal with the overlapping problems—autocratic regimes and extremist movements—that fed off each other.<sup>2</sup>*

I. Introduction

Since September 11, 2001, Americans have become all too familiar with Islamic extremist movements and the wars in the Middle East. Over the past decade, journalists have filled newspapers with daily accounts of American travails in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the larger question of the overall appeal of Islamic extremism throughout the Islamic world has received little coverage. The recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain have brought this question to the forefront of American minds.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ROBIN WRIGHT, *ROCK THE CASBAH: RAGE AND REBELLION ACROSS THE ISLAMIC WORLD* (2011).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>3</sup> See Sherry Ricchiardi, *Whatever Happened to Iraq?*, *AM. JOURNALISM REV.*, June/July 2008, available at <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=4515> (detailing how Iraq filled twenty-three percent of TV news in early 2007); Katherine Tiedemann, *Afghanistan vs. Iraq Media Coverage, the Redux*, *AFPAK CHANNEL* (Sept. 17, 2009, 10:55 AM), [http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/09/17/afghanistan\\_vs\\_iraw\\_media\\_coverage\\_the\\_redux](http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/09/17/afghanistan_vs_iraw_media_coverage_the_redux) (detailing how coverage of Afghanistan picked up in 2009 as Iraq coverage trailed off).

<sup>4</sup> For a brief description of these events, see *The Arab Spring: A Year of Revolution*, *NAT’L PUB. RADIO* (Dec. 17, 2011), <http://www.npr.org/2011/12/17/143897126/the-arab-spring-a-year-of-revolution> (describing the overthrows of President Ali in Tunisia, President Mubarak in Egypt, and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya); Thomas Erdbrink, *Bahrain Crackdown Fuels Tensions in Gulf Region*, *WASH. POST* (Apr. 23, 2011) (describing the unsuccessful protests of the Al-Khalifa monarchy in Bahrain); Rick Gladstone & Neil MacFarquhar, *U.N. Official Rebukes Syria over Violence*, *N.Y. TIMES*, at A4 (Feb. 14, 2012) (describing the Syria conflict and steps taken over the past year).

In *Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World*, Robin Wright paints an optimistic account of how individuals are moving the Islamic world toward a more open and accepting society. Wright discusses many cultural topics that are pushing Islamic societies in that direction, from the women's rights movement in Egypt to the anti-extremist Islamic hip-hop movement. Her message is twofold: First, only Muslims can overcome the extremist movement, not Western armies; and second, Muslim society is in the midst of a counter-jihad movement that is doing exactly that.<sup>5</sup> While the book minimizes the United States' contributions to the counter-jihad movement and provides selective use of statistics, it succeeds in educating the reader on current cultural trends against extremism as well as the historical background to the recent revolutions from the perspective of the inhabitants.

## II. Wright's Background

Robin Wright has covered the Middle East since 1972 for the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and several other newspapers. She is a senior fellow at the U.S. Institute for Peace and has written seven books on the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> Wright first addressed the topic of Islamic extremism in 1985 in her book, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam*.<sup>7</sup> In this first book, she presciently warned that the United States' continued intervention in Middle Eastern politics would cause a backlash of extremism.<sup>8</sup>

Wright authored three more books before returning to the subject of extremism in the Middle East in 2008 in her book *Dreams and Shadows: The Future of the Middle East*.<sup>9</sup> In this book, she speaks more optimistically about "a budding culture of change" that stems from "defiant judges in Cairo, rebel clerics in Tehran, satellite television station owners in Dubai, imaginative feminists in Rabat and the first female candidates in Kuwait, young techies in Jeddah, daring journalists in Beirut and Casablanca, and brave writers and businessmen in Damascus."<sup>10</sup> At the time, critics dismissed her as overly optimistic

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<sup>5</sup> WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Wright, Biography, U.S. INST. FOR PEACE, <http://www.usip.org/experts/robin-wright> (last visited Mar. 7, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> ROBIN WRIGHT, *SACRED RAGE: THE WRATH OF MILITANT ISLAM* (1985).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 262.

<sup>9</sup> ROBIN WRIGHT, *DREAMS AND SHADOWS: THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST* (2008).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 2.

about the overthrow of repressive regimes,<sup>11</sup> but history has proved her correct. Wright brings a journalistic perspective to all her books as she discusses emerging trends from hundreds of interviews and extrapolates them into potential macro-level trends. Her prior books prove to be accurate in her trend analysis more often than not.<sup>12</sup>

### III. Wright's Optimistic Outlook for the Future of the Islamic World

Wright opens *Rock the Casbah* with the now familiar story of Mohamed Bouazizi lighting himself on fire in front of the governor's mansion in Tunisia on December 17, 2010.<sup>13</sup> She succinctly describes how this event set off the Jasmine Revolution and caused Ben Ali to flee from Tunisia after twenty-three years of rule.<sup>14</sup> Wright then describes the events in Egypt that led to Hosni Mubarak, the dictator "had ruled longer than all but three pharaohs" stepping down.<sup>15</sup> Wright gives mention to the protests and reforms carried out in Iran, Jordan, Bahrain, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, as well as giving credit to the role *Facebook* played in the organization of the demonstrators.<sup>16</sup>

After detailing the events of the Arab Spring, Wright lays out her thesis that "[t]he counter-jihad will define the next decade as thoroughly

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<sup>11</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *The End of Jihad*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 2, 2008, at BR8.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., WRIGHT, *supra* note 9, at 1-18 (predicting that the democratic movement in the Middle East will be the major story of the coming decades); WRIGHT, *supra* note 7, at 262 (arguing continued U.S. intervention in Middle Eastern politics would lead to a backlash of extremism).

<sup>13</sup> Mohamed Bouazizi was a fruit vendor in Sidi Bouzid who refused to pay a bribe to a city inspector. Due to his refusal, the city inspector confiscated his fruit and his electronic scale. With no fruit, and no other means to support himself and his family, Bouazizi went to the local governor's office to protest. When his complaints went unanswered, he returned with lighter fluid and shouted, "How do you expect me to earn a living?" and set himself alight. WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 15-16.

<sup>14</sup> The Jasmine Revolution is another name for the revolution in Tunisia, named after the country's national flower. *Id.* at 15-21.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 37-40. Organizers commonly used *Facebook* (an online communications network founded on February 4, 2004) to communicate because it was beyond the government's control and offered privacy to its users. There were numerous demonstrations organized through *Facebook* accounts and there was even a sign in Liberation Square in Egypt that declared "Thank you Facebook" because of its power to organize demonstrators. *Id.* at 27-28. See also *Facebook*, <http://www.facebook.com/facebook> (last visited Mar. 5, 2012) (noting its mission is "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected").

as the extremists dominated the last one”<sup>17</sup> and that “[w]estern armies can win only battles . . . only Muslims can defeat the most serious threat to global security.”<sup>18</sup> Her definition of this counter-jihad is not a movement toward the West or secular values, but a rejection of extremism in favor of a conservative and peaceful interpretation of Islam.<sup>19</sup> Wright attempts to place this counter-jihad in historical context as the “fourth phase of the Islamic revival.” She defines the three prior phases as, first, the politicization of Islam to fight Israel; second, the rise of religious extremists; and third, the rise of political Islamic parties in Algeria, Palestine, and elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> The demarcation that Wright lays out seems forced and unnecessary, but only briefly interrupts the flow of her argument. She credits the symbolic turning point against extremism to Sheikh Salaman al Oudah, an early role model for Osama Bin Laden, who publicly repudiated Bin Laden and his methods in an open letter in 2007.<sup>21</sup>

After laying out her thesis, the reader can detect Wright’s minimization of U.S. policy in her discussion of Iraq. She starts by definitively stating the U.S. military conceded in 2006 that “it had ‘lost’ Iraq’s largest region,” referring the Al Anbar province.<sup>22</sup> Looking to Wright’s footnotes, the reader finds that the United States made no such declaration, but she cites to a news story on an alleged secret assessment by a Marine staff colonel, not a commander.<sup>23</sup> She moves on to describe the Awakening, “just as the United States was giving up on Anbar, the province’s tribal elders began turning against their Sunni brethren . . . . And the Awakening . . . was launched.”<sup>24</sup> Wright does not make any

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<sup>17</sup> WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 43.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 45. The “Arab Spring” refers generally to the protests against autocratic rule that swept across North Africa and the Middle East starting with the Jasmine Revolution in December 2010. Roger Hardy, *Egypt Protests: An Arab Spring as Old Order Crumbles*, BRIT. BROAD. CORP. (Feb. 2, 2011), available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12339521>.

<sup>19</sup> WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 46.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 47–53.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 65. An English translation of the letter can be found online. Amad, *Saudi Cleric’s Ramadan Letter to Osama Bin Laden on NBC*, DAILY KOS, Sept. 18, 2007, <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/09/18/386670/-Saudi-Clerics-Ramadan-Letter-to-Osama-Bin-Laden-on-NBC>.

<sup>22</sup> WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 60.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Situation Called Dire in West Iraq*, WASH. POST, Sept. 11, 2006, at A2.

<sup>24</sup> WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 61. The “Awakening” refers to the decision by Sunni tribal leaders to stop fighting the American military and begin fighting Al Qaeda in Iraq. For a more in depth description, see *Awakening Movement in Iraq*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 19, 2010,

mention of the developing counter-insurgency doctrine in the U.S. military or the shift in strategy to recruit local leaders to fight the insurgency that enabled the Awakening.<sup>25</sup> She then points to “the charismatic young sheikh [Abdul Sattar Abu Risha]—not the American military” as the key to al Qaeda’s defeat.<sup>26</sup> Wright overlooks the fact that enabling local leaders is one of the key tenets of the United States’ counter-insurgency strategy and that their support was arguably gained due to prior successes of the U.S. military.<sup>27</sup> The reader is left to conclude either that Wright does not have an understanding of the U.S. role in Iraq, which seems unlikely with her extensive background, or that she is intentionally downplaying any role that the United States may have had in the success of Al Anbar, Iraq.

After laying out her thesis and detailing the Arab Spring and the Sunni Awakening in Iraq, Wright moves from the role of historian to her more comfortable role as a journalist providing individual accounts of the counter-jihad movement. She begins by addressing the Islamic hip-hop movement through the perspective of artists from seven different nations.<sup>28</sup> She then covers a variety of topics: women’s rights, poetry, reformist sheikhs and imams, and finally Muslim comedians, comic book writers, and playwrights.<sup>29</sup> Each chapter is narrated from the perspective of a few individuals and is filled with lyrics and their experiences. The overall message is that the Muslim youth are rejecting extremism and tyranny in favor of free speech and democracy.<sup>30</sup>

One potential criticism is that it is difficult to tell how widespread and defining these stories are of the larger trends throughout Islamic culture. Wright provides some statistics to reinforce her optimistic message, but

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*available at* [http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iraq/awakening\\_movement/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iraq/awakening_movement/index.html).

<sup>25</sup> U.S. MARINE CORPS WARFIGHTING PUB. 3-33.5, COUNTERINSURGENCY foreword (15 Dec. 2006) (“Soldiers and Marines are expected to be nation builders as well as warriors. They must be prepared to help reestablish institutions and local security forces and assist in rebuilding infrastructure and basic services.”).

<sup>26</sup> WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 61.

<sup>27</sup> 1 AL-ANBAR AWAKENING: AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES 146 (Chief Warrant Officer Four Timothy S. McWilliams, USMC & Lieutenant Colonel Kurtis P. Wheeler, USMC, eds., 2009) (stating that the Awakening was due to a variety of factors including Al Qaeda’s atrocities, American successes in other cities, American staying power, and convincing tribal sheikhs to turn against the insurgency).

<sup>28</sup> WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 115–37.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 138–226.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

she uses them selectively.<sup>31</sup> She cites a Pew Research study that “[s]upport for bin Laden had dropped to 2 percent in Lebanon and 3 percent in Turkey,” and in Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia “only around one in five Muslims has confidence in the al Qaeda leadership.”<sup>32</sup> What she leaves out is that the exact same poll showed a fifty-one percent and fifty-four percent approval for Osama Bin Laden in the Palestinian Territory and Nigeria.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the poll showed a simmering resentment for Israel with more than ninety percent of Egyptians, Lebanese, Jordanians, and Palestinians expressing a negative view of Jewish people.<sup>34</sup> This resentment could spur future extremism as evidenced by the attack on the Israeli Embassy in Cairo shortly after Mubarak’s removal.<sup>35</sup> Wright fails to address these unfavorable statistics for counter-jihad and peace in the Middle East to the detriment of her argument.

It would be easy to dismiss Wright’s assertion of the counter-jihad gaining momentum when the reader notes her selective use of statistics and one-sided analysis of Iraq; however, her extensive experience in the area seems to give her a better sense of emerging trends than most authors and journalists in the field. In Wright’s 2008 book, *Dreams and Shadows*, she argued that there is a budding culture of change in the Middle East repressed by many of the autocratic regimes.<sup>36</sup> She specifically highlighted Egypt as a country on the brink of change.<sup>37</sup> She was dismissed as overly optimistic by a *New York Times* critic stating that

autocratic regimes in the Middle East may be sclerotic, corrupt and detested by their own people, but they are very difficult to remove. Governments in Egypt, Syria and Libya that came to power by military coups in the distant past have learned how to protect themselves against their own armies and security forces.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *E.g., id.* at 52.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* (citing *Mixed Views of Hamas and Hezbollah in Largely Muslim Nations*, PEW GLOBAL ATTITUDES PROJECT, Feb. 4, 2010, at 13).

<sup>33</sup> *Mixed Views of Hamas and Hezbollah in Largely Muslim Nations*, PEW GLOBAL ATTITUDES PROJECT, Feb. 4, 2010, at 13.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> Aya Batrawy, *Egyptians Break into Israel Embassy in Cairo*, WASH.TIMES, Sept. 9, 2011, at A1.

<sup>36</sup> WRIGHT, *supra* note 9, at 1–18.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 65–97.

<sup>38</sup> Cockburn, *supra* note 11.

Clearly, the recent history of the Arab Spring has proven Wright's experienced views quite prescient. With this in mind, the reader should not simply dismiss her optimistic views of the cultural movements within the Middle East.

After her discussion of the recent history of the Jasmine Revolution and the micro-trends in the Islamic world, Wright concludes her book with a hasty and superficial criticism of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.<sup>39</sup> She devotes only eleven pages to her discussion of the complex issue and begins with the statement that American foreign policy is being "shattered . . . after six decades of rock-solid relations with impervious monarchies and sclerotic autocrats."<sup>40</sup> She goes on to criticize the United States for its differing responses to protests throughout the region. Specifically, she cites the quick support in Libya, the late support in Tunisia and Egypt, the tepid support in Syria and Yemen, and the complete lack of support in Bahrain.<sup>41</sup> Wright poses that this varied response will carry a cost in "credibility and cooperation down the road."<sup>42</sup> The reader is left to conclude that Wright's foreign policy recommendation for the United States is to embrace democracy in the region above any other national interest.

Wright ignores the elephant in the room: How would this shift in U.S. foreign policy affect its oil supply?<sup>43</sup> Four of the top ten oil-producing nations fit the definition of autocratic regimes in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia, Iran, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait.<sup>44</sup> If the United States strained relations with all of these Middle East suppliers because of their non-democratic governments, the United States would significantly increase risk to its oil supply by becoming more reliant on other top suppliers with equally difficult policy considerations: Venezuela,

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<sup>39</sup> WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 244–55.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 244.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 244–55.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 249.

<sup>43</sup> For an excellent history of the United States dependence on the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the importance of oil in our national policy, see JAREER ELASS & AMY JAFFE, *THE HISTORY OF U.S. RELATIONS WITH OPEC: LESSONS TO POLICYMAKERS* (2010), available at <http://www.rice.edu/energy/publication/docs/Jaffe%20Elass%20Carbon.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> *The World Factbook*, U.S. CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2173rank.html> (last visited Sept. 11, 2011).

Nigeria, and Russia.<sup>45</sup> The reader is left disappointed in the lack of in-depth analysis of how this change in policy would affect the United States on such an important issue, given her forty years of experience in the region.

Another significant foreign policy issue that Wright simply bypasses is the loss of influence in the Middle East and the loss of military bases if the United States pursued a unilateral policy of supporting any democratic movement in the region. The United States has significant military influence in Egypt due to grants of billions of dollars of aid and conducting high level training with Egypt's military over the past thirty years.<sup>46</sup> Arguably, this is a crucial factor that led to a more professional military and ultimately influenced the Egyptian military to support Egypt's citizens over its dictator.<sup>47</sup> Contrast the Egyptian military response with that of Syria, Iran, and Libya, and the reader can easily see the importance relations between professional militaries can play. None of this military influence is discussed by Wright either in her analysis of Egypt's revolution or in her analysis on U.S. policy.

Turning to military bases, Bahrain hosts U.S. Naval Central Command, which commands 28,000 military personnel on any given day.<sup>48</sup> If the United States came out in support of Bahraini protestors, there is little doubt that the United States would lose the host government's support for the base and be forced to quickly relocate 3000 personnel and much equipment elsewhere. Similar problems would likely occur in Kuwait, a crucial logistics hub into Iraq.<sup>49</sup> This would leave the United States without a long-term presence or a strategic foothold in one of the most volatile regions in the world and likely lead to an increase in Iran's influence in the region.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *U.S. Total Crude Oil and Products Imports*, U.S. ENERGY INFO. ADMIN., [http://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/pet\\_move\\_impcus\\_a2\\_nus\\_ep00\\_im0\\_mbb1\\_.html](http://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/pet_move_impcus_a2_nus_ep00_im0_mbb1_.html) (last visited Sept. 5, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Robert Burns, *Military Ties Help U.S. Influence Egypt Subtly*, NAVY TIMES, Feb. 4, 2011, available at <http://www.navytimes.com/news/2011/02/ap-military-ties-help-us-influence-egypt-subtly-020411/>.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> See *Command Overview*, NAVCENT/5TH FLEET, <http://www.cusnc.navy.mil/command/command.html> (last visited Sept. 11, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Brian Murphy, *Kuwait Port Plan Stirs Tension with Old Enemy Iraq*, ASSOCIATED PRESS, Aug. 24, 2011.

<sup>50</sup> See generally Lara Jakes, *Leaked UN Letter May be Trouble for US/Iraq Talks*, ASSOCIATED PRESS, Sept. 2, 2011, available at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5jmJ-ZBvhJxHgf3vJXMC5sXCwIP-w?docID=9274d5b94984a6d828636a>

#### IV. Conclusion

Wright succeeds in educating the reader on the democratic movement that swept through the Middle East and North Africa in early 2011. She also provides excellent accounts of how individuals are expressing a counter-jihad attitude through a variety of mediums. The reader is left uncertain about how widespread and deep the counter-jihad sentiments run in Islamic society, but hopeful and optimistic of the overall direction. While Wright stumbles slightly with her selective use of statistics, her downplaying of the role of the U.S. military, and her cursory discussion of U.S. policy, she succeeds in making the reader believe in her overall message: a counter-jihad movement has caught on in the Islamic world, and it is effectively countering extremism. Nevertheless, the role of western armies is left in doubt.

Despite its shortcomings, *Rock the Casbah* is well worth the read. First, it broadens the reader's knowledge of the recent historical events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya as well as their underlying causes. Additionally, the book adds depth to the average reader's knowledge of Islamic culture, the cultural differences that exist in different Middle Eastern countries, and the overall movement away from extremists. This depth comes from the unique perspective of an American who has spent four decades covering the region. On balance, the book is a resounding success at both informing and entertaining the reader, but fails to provide the full picture of the events in the region.

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af127f29e (discussing how the presence of U.S. military in Iraq beyond 2011 is still in question).