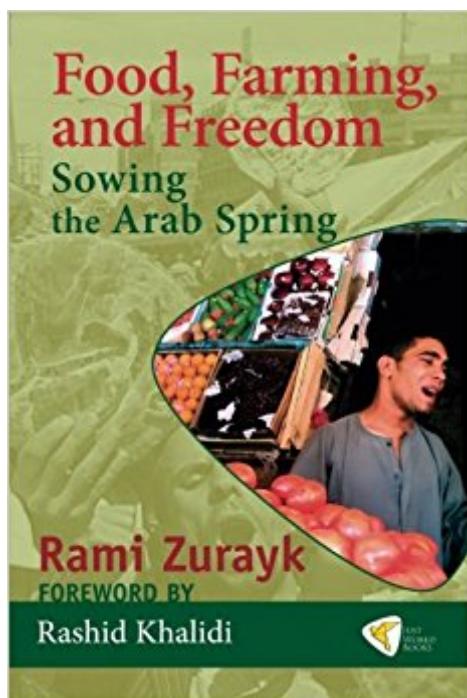


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Food, Farming, And Freedom: Sowing The Arab Spring



Synopsis

The wave of anti-government protests that swept through the Arab world from December 2010 on started to transform politics and society in the Middle East. The protests came as a surprise to many observers-- but not to Rami Zurayk, an veteran Lebanese agronomist and social activist who had been analyzing the collapse of traditional agricultural livelihoods in the Middle East since the late 1980s. In 2007, Zurayk started writing the "Land and People" blog, which charts food-policy and agricultural policy issues throughout the Middle East. Food, Farming, and Freedom presents his choice of the best of the posts in the blog from 2007 through April 2011. It concludes with a chapter tracking the early months of the Arab Spring.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Rami Zurayk is an agronomy professor at the American University of Beirut and a longtime activist for political and social justice. Born in Beirut in 1958, he has witnessed two Israeli-Arab wars, one protracted civil war, one major Israeli invasion, one Israeli retreat, and one Israeli defeat. He has published over a hundred articles, monographs and technical reports on agriculture, food, environment and education, covering numerous countries throughout the Middle East.

Food, Farming and Freedom is about the relationship between agriculture and the Arab Spring. That is, Dr. Zurayk contends that investment in or divestment from agriculture was an important factor in inducing the Arab Spring. He also contends that the U.S-backed governments in the Middle

East/North Africa region simply did not strongly value the rural population or the agriculture that is their chief livelihood. The book is primarily focused on Lebanon, though does discuss Jordan, Syria, and Iraq on occasion. Pros: Overall, the book provides a decent case for the importance of investment and support for small-scale farming. For him, it is a question of viability, economy, and defense. Without support, large-scale rural to urban migration occurs, agricultural exports from smaller farms decreases, income inequality increases, and Israel would have a much easier time invading Southern Lebanon. Zurayk explores the immediate impacts of Israeli attacks and international and Lebanese government inaction in a blunt, evocative style. Cons: Though the book is largely an economic text (focusing on the ripple effects from economic issues), it is light on numbers. Dr. Zurayk also has a tendency to rely on a comfort and culture argument. This is highlighted when he states that: "People may want to eat local food because it reaches somewhere deep inside their souls, a place where what has neither utility nor efficiency can still find a place" (Zurayk 34). There are no tables or images within the main text to intersperse the monotony of text or summarize the numbers given. But where I wanted the break of image or text, the micro-splitting resultant from the blog post format unnecessarily divided related topics and forced me to double-check and relate arguments. The problem is present on the wider scale as well. Zurayk has a fundamental problem defining terms--what such-and-such an agreement said/was meant to do and brief accountings of the historical events mentioned. He continually references "things that he's mentioned before" without the reader having any recollection of him having done so. This dilemma is explained when one looks at the chapter notes/references. When Zurayk says "mentioned," he means in his blog = a post not included here. The reader is then intended to type in the URL given to find the post in question. Needless to say, I found both this burden of reader research and the placement of the references to be cumbersome. It is much easier to have one condensed index at the back of a book. Finally, Zurayk neglects the world implications of Lebanon's lack of rural support. In Liberia, for example, the problem of Lebanon's rural displacement has caused many Lebanese to start businesses there. This creates a tense situation where the Lebanese control many major business projects and the local population becomes disenfranchised. While I understand that this may not be Zurayk's specialty, some evidence of the wider importance of the problem (for here too there are many ripple effects) would have been appreciated. Recommended for: those in an academic context, as some literacy on agricultural economics in the Middle East/North Africa context is necessary to understand the specifics discussed.

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