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The Arab Spring at Five

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Introduction

Gideon Rose

MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY / REUTERS

Protesters gather at Tahrir square in Cairo, Egypt, November 23, 2012.

In the fall of 2010, the Arab world continued its authoritarian slumber. Then many of its people woke up with a start, and within a year the political landscape of the Middle East had changed beyond recognition. Seemingly stable tyrannies in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria were toppled or contested; widespread protests emerged elsewhere; and popular governments sprang up out of the blue. A few years further on, with the protests suppressed, Egypt returned to tyranny, and Syria and Libya in chaos, it all seems like a dream—or a nightmare.

How will history look back on what came to be known as the

Arab Spring? Certainly, the early hopes it raised of successful democratic revolutions were quickly and cruelly dashed—everywhere except Tunisia, whose new regime continues to limp forward. And the skeptics who warned about the uprising's risks have had their pessimism confirmed. A recent report by Dubai's Arab Strategy Forum, for example, reckoned the total costs at more than 1.3 million casualties, 14 million refugees, and $830 billion.

But however bad things look now, such a bleak net assessment is both unfair and premature. It is unfair, because the costs and failures have stemmed as much from the regional old guard's implacable opposition to change as they have from the protesters' demands for a new order. Charging the full bill of the last half decade's turmoil to the people who revolted involves blaming the victims more than the victimizers. And it is premature, because in the long run history is unlikely to be on the side of the authoritarians, whether entrenched or reestablished.

After all, in 1847 Europe, too, slept in political darkness, only to be swept by an extraordinary wave of democratic upheavals the following year. The "Springtime of the Peoples," as the Revolutions of 1848 became known, ushered in popular regimes across the continent—all of which collapsed back into tyranny within a couple of years. There, too, hopes were raised wildly high, only to be dashed, with the uprisings considered a failure and a historical dead end. Yet in retrospect, 1848 was clearly not just a self-contained story but one chapter in a long and turbulent process of European democratic development, one that began in the late eighteenth century and did not fully succeed until the mid-twentieth.

All countries and regions have their unique characteristics, of course, but there is little reason to believe that in the long run, economic, social, and political development in the Middle

East will not eventually follow similar courses to those of other regions. And should that happen, the Arab Spring will appear not as a mistake and a failure but as an important battle in a lengthy war. Speaking in 1857 on his “philosophy of reform,” the former slave Frederick Douglass noted:

> *The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. . . . If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.*

It took a long, hard struggle—much too long and too hard—for Douglass’ own cause to triumph. But in the end it did, and history provides cause for optimism as well as sober reflection. It is in that spirit that we offer this collection as a record of the Arab Spring and its course over the past half decade, as recorded in the pages and pixels of Foreign Affairs and ForeignAffairs.com.

Gideon Rose is Editor of Foreign Affairs.

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May/June 2005

Freedom and Justice in the Modern Middle East

Bernard Lewis

MOHAMED AZAKIR / REUTERS

Relatives of freed Lebanese prisoner Samir Qantar carry him aloft during a welcome ceremony upon his arrival in his hometown of Abay, Mount Lebanon July 17, 2008.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

For Muslims as for others, history is important, but they approach it with a special concern and awareness. The career of the Prophet Muhammad, the creation and expansion of the Islamic community and state, and the formulation and elaboration of the holy law of Islam are events in history, known from historical memory or record and narrated and

debated by historians since early times. In the Islamic Middle East, one may still find passionate arguments, even bitter feuds, about events that occurred centuries or sometimes millennia ago -- about what happened, its significance, and its current relevance. This historical awareness has acquired new dimensions in the modern period, as Muslims -- particularly those in the Middle East -- have suffered new experiences that have transformed their vision of themselves and the world and reshaped the language in which they discuss it.

In 1798, the French Revolution arrived in Egypt in the form of a small expeditionary force commanded by a young general called Napoleon Bonaparte. The force invaded, conquered, and ruled Egypt without difficulty for several years. General Bonaparte proudly announced that he had come "in the name of the French Republic, founded on the principles of liberty and equality." This was, of course, published in French and also in Arabic translation. Bonaparte brought his Arabic translators with him, a precaution that some later visitors to the region seem to have overlooked.

The reference to equality was no problem: Egyptians, like other Muslims, understood it very well. Equality among believers was a basic principle of Islam from its foundation in the seventh century, in marked contrast to both the caste system of India to the east and the privileged aristocracies of the Christian world to the west. Islam really did insist on equality and achieved a high measure of success in enforcing it. Obviously, the facts of life created inequalities -- primarily social and economic, sometimes also ethnic and racial -- but these were in defiance of Islamic principles and never reached the levels of the Western world. Three exceptions to the Islamic rule of equality were enshrined in the holy law: the inferiority of slaves, women, and unbelievers. But these exceptions were not so remarkable; for a long time in the United States, in practice if not in principle, only white male

Protestants were "born free and equal." The record would seem to indicate that as late as the nineteenth or even the early twentieth century, a poor man of humble origins had a better chance of rising to the top in the Muslim Middle East than anywhere in Christendom, including post-revolutionary France and the United States.

Equality, then, was a well-understood principle, but what about the other word Bonaparte mentioned -- "liberty," or freedom? This term caused some puzzlement among the Egyptians. In Arabic usage at that time and for some time after, the word "freedom" -- hurriyya -- was in no sense a political term. It was a legal term. One was free if one was not a slave. To be liberated, or freed, meant to be manumitted, and in the Islamic world, unlike in the Western world, "slavery" and "freedom" were not until recently used as metaphors for bad and good government.

The puzzlement continued until a very remarkable Egyptian scholar found the answer. Sheikh Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi was a professor at the still unmodernized al-Azhar University of the early nineteenth century. The ruler of Egypt had decided it was time to try and catch up with the West, and in 1826 he sent a first mission of 44 Egyptian students to Paris. Sheikh Tahtawi accompanied them and stayed in Paris until 1831. He was what might be called a chaplain, there to look after the students' spiritual welfare and to see that they did not go astray -- no mean task in Paris at that time.

During his stay, he seems to have learned more than any of his wards, and he wrote a truly fascinating book giving his impressions of post-revolutionary France. The book was published in Cairo in Arabic in 1834 and in a Turkish translation in 1839. It remained for decades the only description of a modern European country available to the Middle Eastern Muslim reader. Sheikh Tahtawi devotes a chapter to French government, and in it he mentions how the

French kept talking about freedom. He obviously at first shared the general perplexity about what the status of not being a slave had to do with politics. And then he understood and explained. When the French talk about freedom, he says, what they mean is what we Muslims call justice. And that was exactly right. Just as the French, and more generally Westerners, thought of good government and bad government as freedom and slavery, so Muslims conceived of them as justice and injustice. These contrasting perceptions help shed light on the political debate that began in the Muslim world with the 1798 French expedition and that has been going on ever since, in a remarkable variety of forms.

JUSTICE FOR ALL

As Sheikh Tahtawi rightly said, the traditional Islamic ideal of good government is expressed in the term "justice." This is represented by several different words in Arabic and other Islamic languages. The most usual, adl, means "justice according to the law" (with "law" defined as God's law, the sharia, as revealed to the Prophet and to the Muslim community). But what is the converse of justice? What is a regime that does not meet the standards of justice? If a ruler is to qualify as just, as defined in the traditional Islamic system of rules and ideas, he must meet two requirements: he must have acquired power rightfully, and he must exercise it rightfully. In other words, he must be neither a usurper nor a tyrant. It is of course possible to be either one without the other, although the normal experience was to be both at the same time.

The Islamic notion of justice is well documented and goes back to the time of the Prophet. The life of the Prophet Muhammad, as related in his biography and reflected in revelation and tradition, falls into two main phases. In the first phase he is still living in his native town of Mecca and opposing its regime. He is preaching a new religion, a new

doctrine that challenges the pagan oligarchy that rules Mecca. The verses in the Koran, and also relevant passages in the prophetic traditions and biography, dating from the Meccan period, carry a message of opposition -- of rebellion, one might even say of revolution, against the existing order.

Then comes the famous migration, the hijra from Mecca to Medina, where Muhammad becomes a wielder, not a victim, of authority. Muhammad, during his lifetime, becomes a head of state and does what heads of state do. He promulgates and enforces laws, he raises taxes, he makes war, he makes peace; in a word, he governs. The political tradition, the political maxims, and the political guidance of this period do not focus on how to resist or oppose the government, as in the Meccan period, but on how to conduct government. So from the very beginning of Muslim scripture, jurisprudence, and political culture, there have been two distinct traditions: one, dating from the Meccan period, might be called activist; the other, dating from the Medina period, quietist.

The Koran, for example, makes it clear that there is a duty of obedience: "Obey God, obey the Prophet, obey those who hold authority over you." And this is elaborated in a number of sayings attributed to Muhammad. But there are also sayings that put strict limits on the duty of obedience. Two dicta attributed to the Prophet and universally accepted as authentic are indicative. One says, "there is no obedience in sin"; in other words, if the ruler orders something contrary to the divine law, not only is there no duty of obedience, but there is a duty of disobedience. This is more than the right of revolution that appears in Western political thought. It is a duty of revolution, or at least of disobedience and opposition to authority. The other pronouncement, "do not obey a creature against his creator," again clearly limits the authority of the ruler, whatever form of ruler that may be.

These two traditions, the one quietist and the other activist,

continue right through the recorded history of Islamic states and Islamic political thought and practice. Muslims have been interested from the very beginning in the problems of politics and government: the acquisition and exercise of power, succession, legitimacy, and -- especially relevant here -- the limits of authority.

All this is well recorded in a rich and varied literature on politics. There is the theological literature; the legal literature, which could be called the constitutional law of Islam; the practical literature -- handbooks written by civil servants for civil servants on how to conduct the day-to-day business of government; and, of course, there is the philosophical literature, which draws heavily on the ancient Greeks, whose work was elaborated in translations and adaptations, creating distinctly Islamic versions of Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Politics.

In the course of time, the quietist, or authoritarian, trend grew stronger, and it became more difficult to maintain those limitations on the autocracy of the ruler that had been prescribed by holy scripture and holy law. And so the literature places increasing stress on the need for order. A word used very frequently in the discussions is fitna, an Arabic term that can be translated as "sedition," "disorder," "disturbance," and even "anarchy" in certain contexts. The point is made again and again, with obvious anguish and urgency: tyranny is better than anarchy. Some writers even go so far as to say that an hour -- or even a moment -- of anarchy is worse than a hundred years of tyranny. That is one point of view -- but not the only one. In some times and places within the Muslim world, it has been dominant; in other times and places, it has been emphatically rejected.

THEORY VERSUS HISTORY

The Islamic tradition insists very strongly on two points

concerning the conduct of government by the ruler. One is the need for consultation. This is explicitly recommended in the Koran. It is also mentioned very frequently in the traditions of the Prophet. The converse is despotism; in Arabic istibdad, "despotism" is a technical term with very negative connotations. It is regarded as something evil and sinful, and to accuse a ruler of istibdad is practically a call to depose him.

With whom should the ruler consult? In practice, with certain established interests in society. In the earliest times, consulting with the tribal chiefs was important, and it remains so in some places -- for example, in Saudi Arabia and in parts of Iraq (but less so in urbanized countries such as Egypt or Syria). Rulers also consulted with the countryside's rural gentry, a very powerful group, and with various groups in the city: the bazaar merchants, the scribes (the nonreligious literate classes, mainly civil servants), the religious hierarchy, and the military establishment, including long-established regimental groups such as the janissaries of the Ottoman Empire. The importance of these groups was, first of all, that they did have real power. They could and sometimes did make trouble for the ruler, even deposing him. Also, the groups' leaders -- tribal chiefs, country notables, religious leaders, heads of guilds, or commanders of the armed forces -- were not nominated by the ruler, but came from within the groups.

Consultation is a central part of the traditional Islamic order, but it is not the only element that can check the ruler's authority. The traditional system of Islamic government is both consensual and contractual. The manuals of holy law generally assert that the new caliph -- the head of the Islamic community and state -- is to be "chosen." The Arabic term used is sometimes translated as "elected," but it does not connote a general or even sectional election. Rather, it refers to a small group of suitable, competent people choosing the ruler's successor. In principle, hereditary succession is

rejected by the juristic tradition. Yet in practice, succession was always hereditary, except when broken by insurrection or civil war; it was -- and in most places still is -- common for a ruler, royal or otherwise, to designate his successor.

But the element of consent is still important. In theory, at times even in practice, the ruler's power -- both gaining it and maintaining it -- depends on the consent of the ruled. The basis of the ruler's authority is described in the classical texts by the Arabic word bay'a, a term usually translated as "homage," as in the subjects paying homage to their new ruler. But a more accurate translation of bay'a -- which comes from a verb meaning "to buy and to sell" -- would be "deal," in other words, a contract between the ruler and the ruled in which both have obligations.

Some critics may point out that regardless of theory, in reality a pattern of arbitrary, tyrannical, despotic government marks the entire Middle East and other parts of the Islamic world. Some go further, saying, "That is how Muslims are, that is how Muslims have always been, and there is nothing the West can do about it." That is a misreading of history. One has to look back a little way to see how Middle Eastern government arrived at its current state.

The change took place in two phases. Phase one began with Bonaparte's incursion and continued through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when Middle Eastern rulers, painfully aware of the need to catch up with the modern world, tried to modernize their societies, beginning with their governments. These transformations were mostly carried out not by imperialist rulers, who tended to be cautiously conservative, but by local rulers -- the sultans of Turkey, the pashas and khedives of Egypt, the shahs of Persia -- with the best of intentions but with disastrous results.

Modernizing meant introducing Western systems of

communication, warfare, and rule, inevitably including the tools of domination and repression. The authority of the state vastly increased with the adoption of instruments of control, surveillance, and enforcement far beyond the capabilities of earlier leaders, so that by the end of the twentieth century any tin-pot ruler of a petty state or even of a quasi state had vastly greater powers than were ever enjoyed by the mighty caliphs and sultans of the past.

But perhaps an even worse result of modernization was the abrogation of the intermediate powers in society -- the landed gentry, the city merchants, the tribal chiefs, and others -- which in the traditional order had effectively limited the authority of the state. These intermediate powers were gradually weakened and mostly eliminated, so that on the one hand the state was getting stronger and more pervasive, and on the other hand the limitations and controls were being whittled away.

This process is described and characterized by one of the best nineteenth-century writers on the Middle East, the British naval officer Adolphus Slade, who was attached as an adviser to the Turkish fleet and spent much of his professional life there. He vividly portrays this process of change. He discusses what he calls the old nobility, primarily the landed gentry and the city bourgeoisie, and the new nobility, those who are part of the state and derive their authority from the ruler, not from their own people. "The old nobility lived on their estates," he concludes. "The state is the estate of the new nobility." This is a profound truth and, in the light of subsequent and current developments, a remarkably prescient formulation.

The second stage of political upheaval in the Middle East can be dated with precision. In 1940, the government of France surrendered to Nazi Germany. A new collaborationist government was formed and established in a watering place

called Vichy, and General Charles de Gaulle moved to London and set up a Free French committee. The French empire was beyond the reach of the Germans at that point, and the governors of the French colonies and dependencies were free to decide: they could stay with Vichy or rally to de Gaulle. Vichy was the choice of most of them, and in particular the rulers of the French-mandated territory of Syria-Lebanon, in the heart of the Arab East. This meant that Syria-Lebanon was wide open to the Nazis, who moved in and made it the main base of their propaganda and activity in the Arab world.

It was at that time that the ideological foundations of what later became the Baath Party were laid, with the adaptation of Nazi ideas and methods to the Middle Eastern situation. The nascent party's ideology emphasized pan-Arabism, nationalism, and a form of socialism. The party was not officially founded until April 1947, but memoirs of the time and other sources show that the Nazi interlude is where it began. From Syria, the Germans and the proto-Baathists also set up a pro-Nazi regime in Iraq, led by the famous, and notorious, Rashid Ali al-Gailani.

The Rashid Ali regime in Iraq was overthrown by the British after a brief military campaign in May-June 1941. Rashid Ali went to Berlin, where he spent the rest of the war as Hitler's guest with his friend the mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini. British and Free French forces then moved into Syria, transferring it to Gaullist control. In the years that followed the end of World War II, the British and the French departed, and after a brief interval the Soviets moved in.

The leaders of the Baath Party easily switched from the Nazi model to the communist model, needing only minor adjustments. This was a party not in the Western sense of an organization built to win elections and votes. It was a party in the Nazi and Communist sense, part of the government apparatus particularly concerned with indoctrination,

surveillance, and repression. The Baath Party in Syria and the separate Baath Party in Iraq continued to function along these lines.

Since 1940 and again after the arrival of the Soviets, the Middle East has basically imported European models of rule: fascist, Nazi, and communist. But to speak of dictatorship as being the immemorial way of doing things in that part of the world is simply untrue. It shows ignorance of the Arab past, contempt for the Arab present, and unconcern for the Arab future. The type of regime that was maintained by Saddam Hussein -- and that continues to be maintained by some other rulers in the Muslim world -- is modern, indeed recent, and very alien to the foundations of Islamic civilization. There are older rules and traditions on which the peoples of the Middle East can build.

CHUTES AND LADDERS

There are, of course, several obvious hindrances to the development of democratic institutions in the Middle East. The first and most obvious is the pattern of autocratic and despotic rule currently embedded there. Such rule is alien, with no roots in either the classical Arab or the Islamic past, but it is by now a couple of centuries old and is well entrenched, constituting a serious obstacle.

Another, more traditional hurdle is the absence in classical Islamic political thought and practice of the notion of citizenship, in the sense of being a free and participating member of a civic entity. This notion, with roots going back to the Greek polites, a member of the polis, has been central in Western civilization from antiquity to the present day. It, and the idea of the people participating not just in the choice of a ruler but in the conduct of government, is not part of traditional Islam. In the great days of the caliphate, there were mighty, flourishing cities, but they had no formal status

as such, nor anything that one might recognize as civic government. Towns consisted of agglomerations of neighborhoods, which in themselves constituted an important focus of identity and loyalty. Often, these neighborhoods were based on ethnic, tribal, religious, sectarian, or even occupational allegiances. To this day, there is no word in Arabic corresponding to "citizen." The word normally used on passports and other documents is muwatin, the literal meaning of which is "compatriot." With a lack of citizenship went a lack of civic representation. Although different social groups did choose their own leaders during the classical period, the concept of choosing individuals to represent the citizenry in a corporate body or assembly was alien to Muslims' experience and practice.

Yet, other positive elements of Islamic history and thought could help in the development of democracy. Notably, the idea of consensual, contractual, and limited government is again becoming an issue today. The traditional rejection of despotism, of istibdad, has gained a new force and a new urgency: Europe may have disseminated the ideology of dictatorship, but it also spread a corresponding ideology of popular revolt against dictatorship.

The rejection of despotism, familiar in both traditional and, increasingly, modern writings, is already having a powerful impact. Muslims are again raising -- and in some cases practicing -- the related idea of consultation. For the pious, these developments are based on holy law and tradition, with an impressive series of precedents in the Islamic past. One sees this revival particularly in Afghanistan, whose people underwent rather less modernization and are therefore finding it easier to resurrect the better traditions of the past, notably consultation by the government with various entrenched interests and loyalty groups. This is the purpose of the Loya Jirga, the "grand council" that consists of a wide range of different groups -- ethnic, tribal, religious, regional,

professional, and others. There are signs of a tentative movement toward inclusiveness in the Middle East as well.

There are also other positive influences at work, sometimes in surprising forms. Perhaps the single most important development is the adoption of modern communications. The printing press and the newspaper, the telegraph, the radio, and the television have all transformed the Middle East. Initially, communications technology was an instrument of tyranny, giving the state an effective new weapon for propaganda and control.

But this trend could not last indefinitely. More recently, particularly with the rise of the Internet, television satellites, and cell phones, communications technology has begun to have the opposite effect. It is becoming increasingly clear that one of the main reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union was the information revolution. The old Soviet system depended in large measure on control of the production, distribution, and exchange of information and ideas; as modern communications developed, this became no longer possible. The information revolution posed the same dilemma for the Soviet Union as the Industrial Revolution did for the Ottoman and other Islamic empires: either accept it and cease to exist in the same manner or reject it and fall increasingly behind the rest of the world. The Soviets tried and failed to resolve this dilemma, and the Russians are still struggling with the consequences.

A parallel process is already beginning in the Islamic countries of the Middle East. Even some of the intensely and unscrupulously propagandist television programs that now infest the airwaves contribute to this process, indirectly and unintentionally, by offering a diversity of lies that arouse suspicion and questioning. Television also brings to the peoples of the Middle East a previously unknown spectacle -- that of lively and vigorous public disagreement and debate. In

some places, young people even watch Israeli television. In addition to seeing well-known Israeli public figures "banging the table and screaming at each other" (as one Arab viewer described it with wonderment), they sometimes see even Israeli Arabs arguing in the Knesset, denouncing Israeli ministers and policies -- on Israeli television. The spectacle of a lively, vibrant, rowdy democracy at work, notably the unfamiliar sight of unconstrained, uninhibited, but orderly argument between conflicting ideas and interests, is having an impact.

Modern communications have also had another effect, in making Middle Eastern Muslims more painfully aware of how badly things have gone wrong. In the past, they were not really conscious of the differences between their world and the rest. They did not realize how far they were falling behind not only the advanced West, but also the advancing East -- first Japan, then China, India, South Korea, and Southeast Asia -- and practically everywhere else in terms of standard of living, achievement, and, more generally, human and cultural development. Even more painful than these differences are the disparities between groups of people in the Middle East itself.

Right now, the question of democracy is more pertinent to Iraq than perhaps to any other Middle Eastern country. In addition to the general factors, Iraq may benefit from two characteristics specific to its circumstances. One relates to infrastructure and education. Of all the countries profiting from oil revenues in the past decades, pre-Saddam Iraq probably made the best use of its revenues. Its leaders developed the country's roads, bridges, and utilities, and particularly a network of schools and universities of a higher standard than in most other places in the region. These, like everything else in Iraq, were devastated by Saddam's rule. But even in the worst of conditions, an educated middle class will somehow contrive to educate its children, and the results

of this can be seen in the Iraqi people today.

The other advantage is the position of women, which is far better than in most places in the Islamic world. They do not enjoy greater rights -- "rights" being a word without meaning in that context -- but rather access and opportunity. Under Saddam's predecessors, women had access to education, including higher education, and therefore to careers, with few parallels in the Muslim world. In the West, women's relative freedom has been a major reason for the advance of the greater society; women would certainly be an important, indeed essential, part of a democratic future in the Middle East.

FUNDAMENTAL DANGERS

The main threat to the development of democracy in Iraq and ultimately in other Arab and Muslim countries lies not in any inherent social quality or characteristic, but in the very determined efforts that are being made to ensure democracy's failure. The opponents of democracy in the Muslim world come from very different sources, with sharply contrasting ideologies. An alliance of expediency exists between different groups with divergent interests.

One such group combines the two interests most immediately affected by the inroads of democracy -- the tyranny of Saddam in Iraq and other endangered tyrannies in the region -- and, pursuing these parallel concerns, is attempting to restore the former and preserve the latter. In this the group also enjoys some at least tacit support from outside forces -- governmental, commercial, ideological, and other -- in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere, with a practical or emotional interest in its success.

Most dangerous are the so-called Islamic fundamentalists, those for whom democracy is part of the greater evil

emanating from the West, whether in the old-fashioned form of imperial domination or in the more modern form of cultural penetration. Satan, in the Koran, is "the insidious tempter who whispers in men's hearts." The modernizers, with their appeal to women and more generally to the young, are seen to strike at the very heart of the Islamic order -- the state, the schoolroom, the market, and even the family.

The fundamentalists view the Westerners and their dupes and disciples, the Westernizers, as not only impeding the predestined advance of Islam to final triumph in the world, but even endangering it in its homelands. Unlike reformers, fundamentalists perceive the problem of the Muslim world to be not insufficient modernization, but an excess of modernization -- and even modernization itself. For them, democracy is an alien and infidel intrusion, part of the larger and more pernicious influence of the Great Satan and his cohorts. The fundamentalist response to Western rule and still more to Western social and cultural influence has been gathering force for a long time. It has found expression in an increasingly influential literature and in a series of activist movements, the most notable of which is the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928. Political Islam first became a major international factor with the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The word "revolution" has been much misused in the Middle East and has served to designate and justify almost any violent transfer of power at the top. But what happened in Iran was a genuine revolution, a major change with a very significant ideological challenge, a shift in the basis of society that had an immense impact on the whole Islamic world, intellectually, morally, and politically. The process that began in Iran in 1979 was a revolution in the same sense as the French and the Russian revolutions were. Like its predecessors, the Iranian Revolution has gone through various stages of inner and outer conflict and change and now seems to be entering the Napoleonic or, perhaps

more accurately, the Stalinist phase.

The theocratic regime in Iran swept to power on a wave of popular support nourished by resentment against the old regime, its policies, and its associations. Since then, the regime has become increasingly unpopular as the ruling mullahs have shown themselves to be just as corrupt and oppressive as the ruling cliques in other countries in the region. There are many indications in Iran of a rising tide of discontent. Some seek radical change in the form of a return to the past; others, by far the larger number, place their hopes in the coming of true democracy. The rulers of Iran are thus very apprehensive of democratic change in Iraq, the more so as a majority of Iraqis are Shiites, like the Iranians. By its mere existence, a Shiite democracy on Iran's western frontier would pose a challenge, indeed a mortal threat, to the regime of the mullahs, so they are doing what they can to prevent or deflect it.

Of far greater importance at the present are the Sunni fundamentalists. An important element in the Sunni holy war is the rise and spread -- and in some areas dominance -- of Wahhabism. Wahhabism is a school of Islam that arose in Nejd, in central Arabia, in the eighteenth century. It caused some trouble to the rulers of the Muslim world at the time but was eventually repressed and contained. It reappeared in the twentieth century and acquired new importance when the House of Saud, the local tribal chiefs committed to Wahhabism, conquered the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and created the Saudi monarchy. This brought together two factors of the highest importance. One, the Wahhabi Saudis now ruled the holy cities and therefore controlled the annual Muslim pilgrimage, which gave them immense prestige and influence in the Islamic world. Two, the discovery and exploitation of oil placed immense wealth at their disposal. What would otherwise have been an extremist fringe in a marginal country thus had a worldwide impact. Now the

forces that were nourished, nurtured, and unleashed threaten even the House of Saud itself.

The first great triumph of the Sunni fundamentalists was the collapse of the Soviet Union, which they saw -- not unreasonably -- as their victory. For them the Soviet Union was defeated not in the Cold War waged by the West, but in the Islamic jihad waged by the guerrilla fighters in Afghanistan. As Osama bin Laden and his cohorts have put it, they destroyed one of the two last great infidel superpowers -- the more difficult and the more dangerous of the two. Dealing with the pampered and degenerate Americans would, so they believed, be much easier. American actions and discourse have at times weakened and at times strengthened this belief.

In a genuinely free election, fundamentalists would have several substantial advantages over moderates and reformers. One is that they speak a language familiar to Muslims. Democratic parties promote an ideology and use a terminology mostly strange to the "Muslim street." The fundamentalist parties, on the other hand, employ familiar words and evoke familiar values both to criticize the existing secularist, authoritarian order and to offer an alternative. To broadcast this message, the fundamentalists utilize an enormously effective network that meets and communicates in the mosque and speaks from the pulpit. None of the secular parties has access to anything comparable. Religious revolutionaries, and even terrorists, also gain support because of their frequently genuine efforts to alleviate the suffering of the common people. This concern often stands in marked contrast with the callous and greedy unconcern of the current wielders of power and influence in the Middle East. The example of the Iranian Revolution would seem to indicate that once in power these religious militants are no better, and are sometimes even worse, than those they overthrow and replace. But until then, both the current perceptions and the future hopes of the people can work in their favor.

Finally, perhaps most important of all, democratic parties are ideologically bound to allow fundamentalists freedom of action. The fundamentalists suffer from no such disability; on the contrary, it is their mission when in power to suppress sedition and unbelief.

Despite these difficulties, there are signs of hope, notably the Iraqi general election in January. Millions of Iraqis went to polling stations, stood in line, and cast their votes, knowing that they were risking their lives at every moment of the process. It was a truly momentous achievement, and its impact can already be seen in neighboring Arab and other countries. Arab democracy has won a battle, not a war, and still faces many dangers, both from ruthless and resolute enemies and from hesitant and unreliable friends. But it was a major battle, and the Iraqi election may prove a turning point in Middle Eastern history no less important than the arrival of General Bonaparte and the French Revolution in Egypt more than two centuries ago.

FEAR ITSELF

The creation of a democratic political and social order in Iraq or elsewhere in the Middle East will not be easy. But it is possible, and there are increasing signs that it has already begun. At the present time there are two fears concerning the possibility of establishing a democracy in Iraq. One is the fear that it will not work, a fear expressed by many in the United States and one that is almost a dogma in Europe; the other fear, much more urgent in ruling circles in the Middle East, is that it will work. Clearly, a genuinely free society in Iraq would constitute a mortal threat to many of the governments of the region, including both Washington's enemies and some of those seen as Washington's allies.

The end of World War II opened the way for democracy in the former Axis powers. The end of the Cold War brought a

measure of freedom and a movement toward democracy in much of the former Soviet domains. With steadfastness and patience, it may now be possible at last to bring both justice and freedom to the long-tormented peoples of the Middle East.

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Demystifying the Arab Spring

Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya

Lisa Anderson

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In Tunisia, protesters escalated calls for the restoration of the country's suspended constitution. Meanwhile, Egyptians rose in revolt as strikes across the country brought daily life to a halt and toppled the government. In Libya, provincial leaders worked feverishly to strengthen their newly independent republic.

It was 1919.

That year's events demonstrate that the global diffusion of information and expectations -- so vividly on display in Tahrir Square this past winter -- is not a result of the Internet and social media. The inspirational rhetoric of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points speech, which helped spark the 1919 upheavals, made its way around the world by telegraph. The uprisings of 1919 also suggest that the calculated spread of popular movements, seen across the Arab world last winter, is not a new phenomenon. The Egyptian Facebook campaigners are the modern incarnation of Arab nationalist networks whose broadsheets disseminated strategies for civil disobedience throughout the region in the years after World War I.

The important story about the 2011 Arab revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya is not how the globalization of the norms of civic engagement shaped the protesters' aspirations. Nor is it about how activists used technology to share ideas and tactics. Instead, the critical issue is how and why these ambitions and techniques resonated in their various local contexts. The patterns and demographics of the protests varied widely. The demonstrations in Tunisia spiraled toward the capital from the neglected rural areas, finding common cause with a once powerful but much repressed labor movement. In Egypt, by contrast, urbane and cosmopolitan young people in the major cities organized the uprisings. Meanwhile, in Libya, ragtag bands of armed rebels in the eastern provinces ignited the protests, revealing the tribal and regional cleavages that have beset the country for decades. Although they shared a common call for personal dignity and responsive government, the revolutions across these three countries reflected divergent economic grievances and social dynamics -- legacies of their diverse encounters with modern Europe and decades under unique regimes.

As a result, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya face vastly different challenges moving forward. Tunisians will need to grapple with the class divisions manifesting themselves in the country's continuing political unrest. Egyptians must redesign their institutions of government. And Libyans will need to recover from a bloody civil war. For the United States to fulfill its goals in the region, it will need to understand these distinctions and distance itself from the idea that the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan uprisings constitute a cohesive Arab revolt.

BEN ALI'S TUNISIAN FIEFDOM

The profound differences between the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan uprisings are not always apparent in the popular media. The timing of the popular revolts -- so sudden and almost simultaneous -- suggests that the similarities these autocracies shared, from their aging leaders and corrupt and ineffectual governments to their educated, unemployed, and disaffected youth, were sufficient to explain the wave of revolutions. Yet the authorities that these young protesters confronted were unique in each nation -- as will be the difficulties they face in the future.

Former Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali -- the first Arab dictator to fall to mass protests -- initially seemed an unlikely victim. Tunisia has long enjoyed the Arab world's best educational system, largest middle class, and strongest organized labor movement. Yet behind those achievements, Ben Ali's government tightly restricted free expression and political parties. In an almost Orwellian way, he cultivated and manipulated the country's international image as a modern, technocratic regime and a tourist-friendly travel destination. Beyond the cosmopolitan façade frequented by tourists lay bleak, dusty roads and miserable prospects. It is small wonder that the Islamists' claim that the government was prostituting the country for foreign exchange resonated

in Tunisia.

Ben Ali's family was also unusually personalist and predatory in its corruption. As the whistleblower Web site WikiLeaks recently revealed, the U.S. ambassador to Tunisia reported in 2006 that more than half of Tunisia's commercial elites were personally related to Ben Ali through his three adult children, seven siblings, and second wife's ten brothers and sisters. This network became known in Tunisia as "the Family."

That said, although the scale of corruption at the top was breathtaking, Ben Ali's administration did not depend on the kind of accumulation of small bribes that subverted bureaucracies elsewhere, including in Libya and, to a lesser extent, Egypt. This means that Tunisia's government institutions were relatively healthy, raising the prospects for a clean, efficient, and technocratic government to replace Ben Ali.

Tunisia's military also played a less significant role in the country's revolt than the armed forces in the other nations experiencing unrest. Unlike militaries elsewhere in the Arab world, such as Egypt, the Tunisian army has never experienced combat and does not dominate the domestic economy. Under Ben Ali, it existed in the shadow of the country's domestic security services, from which Ben Ali, a former military police officer, hailed. Although its refusal to support Ben Ali's regime contributed to the country's revolution, the military has not participated meaningfully in managing the transition period and is unlikely to shape the ultimate outcome in any significant way.

Since Tunisia's protests initiated the wave of unrest in the Arab world, they were more spontaneous and less well organized than subsequent campaigns in other nations. Yet they demonstrated the power of the country's labor movement, as repeated strikes fueled protests both before

Ben Ali fled and as the first short-lived successor government -- soon replaced by a second one more amenable to the major unions -- attempted to contain the damage to what remained of his regime.

The protests also revealed a sharp generational divide among the opposition. The quick-fire demonstrations filled with angry youth made the generation of regime dissidents from the 1980s, primarily union activists and Islamist militants then led by Rachid al-Ghannouchi, appear elderly and outmoded. Images of an enfeebled Ghannouchi returning to Tunisia after 20 years in exile in the wake of Ben Ali's ouster reflected the radical changes in the agenda of Tunisia's protest movement. Tunisians may once again prove receptive to Ghannouchi's brand of political Islam, but only if his Islamists can capture the imagination of Tunisia's young people, who are principally concerned with receiving what they see as their fair share of the country's wealth and employment opportunities. Tunisia's new leadership must therefore incorporate a generation of young people with only theoretical exposure to freedom of belief, expression, and assembly into a system that fosters open political debate and contestation. And it must respond to some of the demands, especially of the labor movement, that will feature prominently in those debates.

EGYPT'S ARMY MAKES ITS MOVE

In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak's fumbling end epitomized the protracted decline of his regime's efficacy. The government's deteriorating ability to provide basic services and seeming indifference to widespread unemployment and poverty alienated tens of millions of Egyptians, a feeling that was exacerbated by growing conspicuous consumption among a business elite connected to Mubarak's son Gamal. Yet the army's carefully calibrated intervention in the uprising indicated the continuing power of a military establishment

honed by equal parts patronage and patriotism. And the protesters' political and tactical sophistication came about as a result of Mubarak's reluctant but real tolerance of a raucous and unruly press.

As it assumed control of Egypt after Mubarak's downfall, the army revealed its enormous influence in Egyptian society. The military is run by generals who earned their stripes in the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel and who have cooperated closely with the United States since Cairo's 1979 peace treaty with Jerusalem. In contrast to the other Arab militaries that have grappled with unrest this year, the Egyptian army is widely respected by the general populace. It is also deeply interwoven into the domestic economy. As a result, the military leadership remains largely hostile to economic liberalization and private-sector growth, views that carry considerable weight within the provisional government. Thus, as in Tunisia (although for different reasons), the pace of privatization and economic reform will likely be slow, and so the emphasis of reforms will be on democratization.

Repairing decades of public-sector corrosion may also prove problematic. Everything in Egypt -- from obtaining a driver's license to getting an education -- is formally very cheap but in practice very expensive, since most transactions, official and unofficial, are accompanied by off-the-books payments. The government pays schoolteachers a pittance, so public education is poor and teachers supplement their salaries by providing private lessons that are essential preparation for school exams. The national police were widely reviled long before their brutal crackdowns at the inception of the January 25 revolt because they represented, in essence, a nationwide protection racket. Ordinary citizens had to bribe police officers all too ready to confiscate licenses and invent violations. The disappearance of the police during the height of the protests -- considered by many Egyptians a deliberate attempt to destabilize the country -- only deepened that

animosity. The process of applying democratic rule of law must begin with the police themselves, meaning that the Interior Ministry will need to reestablish trust between the police and the people.

But the remarkable discipline demonstrated by Egypt's protesters and their subsequent wide-ranging debates about how to reshape their country speak to the unusually high tolerance for free expression in Egypt (by regional standards) prior to the revolution. The campaign to honor Khaled Said, the blogger killed by Egyptian police and whose death initiated the uprising, for example, would have been unimaginable in Tunisia. Egyptians were relatively well prepared to engage in serious and sustained conversations about the composition of their future government, even as they understood that, whatever the outcome, the military would not allow its institutional prerogatives to be substantially eroded.

This latent political wisdom reflects the changes that transformed Egyptian society over the last 15 years, even while the country's aging and ineffectual autocracy remained in place. As Tahrir's protesters were at pains to demonstrate, Egypt has a culture of deep communal bonds and trust, which manifested itself in the demonstrators' incredible discipline: their sustained nonviolence, their refusal to be provoked by thugs and saboteurs, their capacity to police themselves and coordinate their demands, and their ability to organize without any centralized leadership. Perhaps the finest example of this egalitarian spirit was the appearance, in communities rich and poor, of spontaneous citizen mobilizations to maintain order once the police had disengaged. All these developments should give one cause for optimism today about the new Egypt's potential to build and sustain an open society.

THE WRECKAGE OF LIBYA

Whereas demonstrators in Tunis and Cairo successfully ousted their former rulers, Tripoli collapsed into a protracted civil war. Its sustained fighting resulted from Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi's four-decade-long effort to consolidate his power and rule by patronage to kin and clan. Years of artificially induced scarcity in everything from simple consumer goods to basic medical care generated widespread corruption. And the capricious cruelty of Qaddafi's regime produced widespread and deep-seated suspicion. Libyans' trust in their government, and in one another, eroded, and they took refuge in the solace of tribe and family. Libyan society has been fractured, and every national institution, including the military, is divided by the cleavages of kinship and region. As opposed to Tunisia and Egypt, Libya has no system of political alliances, network of economic associations, or national organizations of any kind. Thus, what seemed to begin as nonviolent protests similar to those staged in Tunisia and Egypt soon became an all-out secession -- or multiple separate secessions -- from a failed state.

Libya under Qaddafi has borne traces of the Italian fascism that ruled the country in its colonial days: extravagance, dogmatism, and brutality. In the name of his "permanent revolution," Qaddafi also prohibited private ownership and retail trade, banned a free press, and subverted the civil service and the military leadership. In the absence of any public-sector bureaucracy, including a reliable police force, kin networks have provided safety and security as well as access to goods and services. It was along such networks that Libyan society fractured when the regime's capacity to divide and rule began to unravel at the beginning of the protests. Meanwhile, Qaddafi had distributed his armed forces across a deliberately confusing and uncoordinated array of units. Some forces joined the opposition quickly but were prevented from organizing effectively or deploying sophisticated military equipment.

This lack of social and governmental cohesion will hamper any prospective transition to democracy. Libya must first restore security and introduce the law and order missing for decades under Qaddafi's regime. As daunting as that task may seem, further difficulties lie on the horizon: reviving trust across clans and provinces; reconstructing public administration; strengthening civil society through political parties, open media, and nongovernmental organizations. Libya's decades of international isolation have left the generation in its 30s and 40s -- the one likely to assume leadership in a new Libya -- poorly educated and ill equipped to manage the country. Others have been co-opted by the regime and stand to lose should Qaddafi fall. The challenge for Libya is both simpler and more vexing than those facing Tunisia and Egypt: Libya confronts the complexity not of democratization but of state formation. It will need to construct a coherent national identity and public administration out of Qaddafi's shambles.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

The young activists in each country have been sharing ideas, tactics, and moral support, but they are confronting different opponents and operating within different contexts. The critical distinctions between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya will shape the outcomes of their respective movements. While Tunisia and Egypt grapple in their own ways with building political institutions -- constitutions, political parties, and electoral systems -- Libya will need to begin by constructing the rudiments of a civil society. While Egypt struggles with the long shadow of military rule, Tunisia and Libya will need to redefine the relationship between their privileged capital cities and their sullen hinterlands. Tempting as it is to treat the Arab uprisings as a single movement, their causes and future missions demonstrate the many variations between them.

These distinctions will matter for the United States and its allies. In June 2009, little more than 90 years after Woodrow Wilson's ringing endorsement of self-determination, U.S. President Barack Obama invigorated the Muslim world with his historic speech in Cairo. There, he declared that he has

> *an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.*

His proclamation did not produce this year's democratic upheavals in the Arab world, but it set expectations for how the United States would respond to them. If Washington hopes to fulfill its promise to support these rights, it will need to acquire a nuanced understanding of the historic circumstances of the uprisings. The Obama administration must encourage and rein in various constituencies and institutions in each country, from championing the labor movement in Tunisia to curtailing the military in Egypt. In each case, the United States cannot pursue the goals so eloquently identified by Obama without discarding the notion of a singular Arab revolt and grappling with the conditions of the countries themselves.

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Understanding the Revolutions of 2011

Weakness and Resilience in Middle Eastern Autocracies

Jack A. Goldstone

GORAN TOMASEVIC / REUTERS

A protester stands in front of a burning barricade during a demonstration in Cairo January 28, 2011.

The wave of revolutions sweeping the Middle East bears a striking resemblance to previous political earthquakes. As in Europe in 1848, rising food prices and high unemployment have fueled popular protests from Morocco to Oman. As in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989, frustration with

closed, corrupt, and unresponsive political systems has led to defections among elites and the fall of once powerful regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and perhaps Libya. Yet 1848 and 1989 are not the right analogies for this past winter's events. The revolutions of 1848 sought to overturn traditional monarchies, and those in 1989 were aimed at toppling communist governments. The revolutions of 2011 are fighting something quite different: "sultanistic" dictatorships. Although such regimes often appear unshakable, they are actually highly vulnerable, because the very strategies they use to stay in power make them brittle, not resilient. It is no coincidence that although popular protests have shaken much of the Middle East, the only revolutions to succeed so far -- those in Tunisia and Egypt -- have been against modern sultans.

For a revolution to succeed, a number of factors have to come together. The government must appear so irremediably unjust or inept that it is widely viewed as a threat to the country's future; elites (especially in the military) must be alienated from the state and no longer willing to defend it; a broad-based section of the population, spanning ethnic and religious groups and socioeconomic classes, must mobilize; and international powers must either refuse to step in to defend the government or constrain it from using maximum force to defend itself.

Revolutions rarely triumph because these conditions rarely coincide. This is especially the case in traditional monarchies and one-party states, whose leaders often manage to maintain popular support by making appeals to respect for royal tradition or nationalism. Elites, who are often enriched by such governments, will only forsake them if their circumstances or the ideology of the rulers changes drastically. And in almost all cases, broad-based popular mobilization is difficult to achieve because it requires bridging the disparate interests of the urban and rural poor,

the middle class, students, professionals, and different ethnic or religious groups. History is replete with student movements, workers' strikes, and peasant uprisings that were readily put down because they remained a revolt of one group, rather than of broad coalitions. Finally, other countries have often intervened to prop up embattled rulers in order to stabilize the international system.

Yet there is another kind of dictatorship that often proves much more vulnerable, rarely retaining power for more than a generation: the sultanistic regime. Such governments arise when a national leader expands his personal power at the expense of formal institutions. Sultanistic dictators appeal to no ideology and have no purpose other than maintaining their personal authority. They may preserve some of the formal aspects of democracy -- elections, political parties, a national assembly, or a constitution -- but they rule above them by installing compliant supporters in key positions and sometimes by declaring states of emergency, which they justify by appealing to fears of external (or internal) enemies.

Behind the scenes, such dictators generally amass great wealth, which they use to buy the loyalty of supporters and punish opponents. Because they need resources to fuel their patronage machine, they typically promote economic development, through industrialization, commodity exports, and education. They also seek relationships with foreign countries, promising stability in exchange for aid and investment. However wealth comes into the country, most of it is funneled to the sultan and his cronies.

The new sultans control their countries' military elites by keeping them divided. Typically, the security forces are separated into several commands (army, air force, police, intelligence) -- each of which reports directly to the leader. The leader monopolizes contact between the commands, between the military and civilians, and with foreign

governments, a practice that makes sultans essential for both coordinating the security forces and channeling foreign aid and investment. To reinforce fears that foreign aid and political coordination would disappear in their absence, sultans typically avoid appointing possible successors.

To keep the masses depoliticized and unorganized, sultans control elections and political parties and pay their populations off with subsidies for key goods, such as electricity, gasoline, and foodstuffs. When combined with surveillance, media control, and intimidation, these efforts generally ensure that citizens stay disconnected and passive.

By following this pattern, politically adept sultans around the world have managed to accumulate vast wealth and high concentrations of power. Among the most famous in recent history were Mexico's Porfirio Díaz, Iran's Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Nicaragua's Somoza dynasty, Haiti's Duvalier dynasty, the Philippines' Ferdinand Marcos, and Indonesia's Suharto.

But as those sultans all learned, and as the new generation of sultans in the Middle East -- including Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen -- has discovered, power that is too concentrated can be difficult to hold on to.

PAPER TIGERS

For all their attempts to prop themselves up, sultanistic dictatorships have inherent vulnerabilities that only increase over time. Sultans must strike a careful balance between self-enrichment and rewarding the elite: if the ruler rewards himself and neglects the elite, a key incentive for the elite to support the regime is removed. But as sultans come to feel more entrenched and indispensable, their corruption

frequently becomes more brazen and concentrated among a small inner circle. As the sultan monopolizes foreign aid and investment or gets too close to unpopular foreign governments, he may alienate elite and popular groups even further.

Meanwhile, as the economy grows and education expands under a sultanistic dictator, the number of people with higher aspirations and a keener sensitivity to the intrusions of police surveillance and abuse increases. And if the entire population grows rapidly while the lion's share of economic gains is hoarded by the elite, inequality and unemployment surge as well. As the costs of subsidies and other programs the regime uses to appease citizens rise, keeping the masses depoliticized places even more stress on the regime. If protests start, sultans may offer reforms or expand patronage benefits -- as Marcos did in the Philippines in 1984 to head off escalating public anger. Yet as Marcos learned in 1986, these sops are generally ineffective once people have begun to clamor for ending the sultan's rule.

The weaknesses of sultanistic regimes are magnified as the leader ages and the question of succession becomes more acute. Sultanistic rulers have sometimes been able to hand over leadership to younger family members. This is only possible when the government has been operating effectively and has maintained elite support (as in Syria in 2000, when President Hafez al-Assad handed power to his son Bashar) or if another country backs the regime (as in Iran in 1941, when Western governments promoted the succession from Reza Shah to his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi). If the regime's corruption has already alienated the country's elites, they may turn on it and try to block a dynastic succession, seeking to regain control of the state (which is what happened in Indonesia in the late 1990s, when the Asian financial crisis dealt a blow to Suharto's patronage machine).

The very indispensability of the sultan also works against a smooth transfer of power. Most of the ministers and other high officials are too deeply identified with the chief executive to survive his fall from power. For example, the shah's 1978 attempt to avoid revolution by substituting his prime minister, Shahpur Bakhtiar, for himself as head of government did not work; the entire regime fell the next year. Ultimately, such moves satisfy neither the demands of the mobilized masses seeking major economic and political change nor the aspirations of the urban and professional class that has taken to the streets to demand inclusion in the control of the state.

Then there are the security forces. By dividing their command structure, the sultan may reduce the threat they pose. But this strategy also makes the security forces more prone to defections in the event of mass protests. Lack of unity leads to splits within the security services; meanwhile, the fact that the regime is not backed by any appealing ideology or by independent institutions ensures that the military has less motivation to put down protests. Much of the military may decide that the country's interests are better served by regime change. If part of the armed forces defects -- as happened under Díaz, the shah of Iran, Marcos, and Suharto -- the government can unravel with astonishing rapidity. In the end, the befuddled ruler, still convinced of his indispensability and invulnerability, suddenly finds himself isolated and powerless.

The degree of a sultan's weakness is often visible only in retrospect. Although it is easy to identify states with high levels of corruption, unemployment, and personalist rule, the extent to which elites oppose the regime and the likelihood that the military will defect often become apparent only once large-scale protests have begun. After all, the elite and military officers have every reason to hide their true feelings until a crucial moment arises, and it is impossible to know which provocation will lead to mass, rather than local,

mobilization. The rapid unraveling of sultanistic regimes thus often comes as a shock.

In some cases, of course, the military does not immediately defect in the face of rebellion. In Nicaragua in the early 1970s, for example, Anastasio Somoza Debayle was able to use loyal troops in Nicaragua's National Guard to put down the rebellion against him. But even when the regime can draw on loyal sectors of the military, it rarely manages to survive. It simply breaks down at a slower pace, with significant bloodshed or even civil war resulting along the way. Somoza's success in 1975 was short-lived; his increasing brutality and corruption brought about an even larger rebellion in the years that followed. After some pitched battles, even formerly loyal troops began to desert, and Somoza fled the country in 1979.

International pressure can also turn the tide. The final blow to Marcos' rule was the complete withdrawal of U.S. support after Marcos dubiously claimed victory in the presidential election held in 1986. When the United States turned away from the regime, his remaining supporters folded, and the nonviolent People Power Revolution forced him into exile.

ROCK THE CASBAH

The revolutions unfolding across the Middle East represent the breakdown of increasingly corrupt sultanistic regimes. Although economies across the region have grown in recent years, the gains have bypassed the majority of the population, being amassed instead by a wealthy few. Mubarak and his family reportedly built up a fortune of between $40 billion and $70 billion, and 39 officials and businessmen close to Mubarak's son Gamal are alleged to have made fortunes averaging more than $1 billion each. In Tunisia, a 2008 U.S. diplomatic cable released by the whistleblower Web site WikiLeaks noted a spike in corruption, warning that Ben Ali's family was becoming so predatory that new investment and

job creation were being stifled and that his family's ostentation was provoking widespread outrage.

Fast-growing and urbanizing populations in the Middle East have been hurt by low wages and by food prices that rose by 32 percent in the last year alone, according to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization. But it is not simply such rising prices, or a lack of growth, that fuels revolutions; it is the persistence of widespread and unrelieved poverty amid increasingly extravagant wealth.

Discontent has also been stoked by high unemployment, which has stemmed in part from the surge in the Arab world's young population. The percentage of young adults -- those aged 15-29 as a fraction of all those over 15 -- ranges from 38 percent in Bahrain and Tunisia to over 50 percent in Yemen (compared to 26 percent in the United States). Not only is the proportion of young people in the Middle East extraordinarily high, but their numbers have grown quickly over a short period of time. Since 1990, youth population aged 15-29 has grown by 50 percent in Libya and Tunisia, 65 percent in Egypt, and 125 percent in Yemen.

Thanks to the modernization policies of their sultanistic governments, many of these young people have been able to go to university, especially in recent years. Indeed, college enrollment has soared across the region in recent decades, more than tripling in Tunisia, quadrupling in Egypt, and expanding tenfold in Libya.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, for any government to create enough jobs to keep pace. For the sultanistic regimes, the problem has been especially difficult to manage. As part of their patronage strategies, Ben Ali and Mubarak had long provided state subsidies to workers and families through such programs as Tunisia's National Employment Fund -- which trained workers, created jobs, and issued loans -- and Egypt's

policy of guaranteeing job placement for college graduates. But these safety nets were phased out in the last decade to reduce expenditures. Vocational training, moreover, was weak, and access to public and many private jobs was tightly controlled by those connected to the regime. This led to incredibly high youth unemployment across the Middle East: the figure for the region hit 23 percent, or twice the global average, in 2009. Unemployment among the educated, moreover, has been even worse: in Egypt, college graduates are ten times as likely to have no job as those with only an elementary school education.

In many developing economies, the informal sector provides an outlet for the unemployed. Yet the sultans in the Middle East made even those activities difficult. After all, the protests were sparked by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old Tunisian man who was unable to find formal work and whose fruit cart was confiscated by the police. Educated youth and workers in Tunisia and Egypt have been carrying out local protests and strikes for years to call attention to high unemployment, low wages, police harassment, and state corruption. This time, their protests combined and spread to other demographics.

These regimes' concentration of wealth and brazen corruption increasingly offended their militaries. Ben Ali and Mubarak both came from the professional military; indeed, Egypt had been ruled by former officers since 1952. Yet in both countries, the military had seen its status eclipsed. Egypt's military leaders controlled some local businesses, but they fiercely resented Gamal Mubarak, who was Hosni Mubarak's heir apparent. As a banker, he preferred to build his influence through business and political cronies rather than through the military, and those connected to him gained huge profits from government monopolies and deals with foreign investors. In Tunisia, Ben Ali kept the military at arm's length to ensure that it would not harbor political ambitions. Yet he

let his wife and her relatives shake down Tunisian businessmen and build seaside mansions. In both countries, military resentments made the military less likely to crack down on mass protests; officers and soldiers would not kill their countrymen just to keep the Ben Ali and Mubarak families and their favorites in power.

A similar defection among factions of the Libyan military led to Qaddafi's rapid loss of large territories. As of this writing, however, Qaddafi's use of mercenaries and exploitation of tribal loyalties have prevented his fall. And in Yemen, Saleh has been kept afloat, if barely, by U.S. aid given in support of his opposition to Islamist terrorists and by the tribal and regional divisions among his opponents. Still, if the opposition unites, as it seems to be doing, and the United States becomes reluctant to back his increasingly repressive regime, Saleh could be the next sultan to topple.

THE REVOLUTIONS' LIMITS

As of this writing, Sudan and Syria, the other sultanistic regions in the region, have not seen major popular protests. Yet Bashir's corruption and the concentration of wealth in Khartoum have become brazen. One of the historic rationales for his regime -- keeping the whole of Sudan under northern control -- recently disappeared with southern Sudan's January 2011 vote in favor of independence. In Syria, Assad has so far retained nationalist support because of his hard-line policies toward Israel and Lebanon. He still maintains the massive state employment programs that have kept Syrians passive for decades, but he has no mass base of support and is dependent on a tiny elite, whose corruption is increasingly notorious. Although it is hard to say how staunch the elite and military support for Bashir and Assad is, both regimes are probably even weaker than they appear and could quickly crumble in the face of broad-based protests.

The region's monarchies are more likely to retain power. This is not because they face no calls for change. In fact, Morocco, Jordan, Oman, and the Persian Gulf kingdoms face the same demographic, educational, and economic challenges that the sultanistic regimes do, and they must reform to meet them. But the monarchies have one big advantage: their political structures are flexible. Modern monarchies can retain considerable executive power while ceding legislative power to elected parliaments. In times of unrest, crowds are more likely to protest for legislative change than for abandonment of the monarchy. This gives monarchs more room to maneuver to pacify the people. Facing protests in 1848, the monarchies in Germany and Italy, for example, extended their constitutions, reduced the absolute power of the king, and accepted elected legislatures as the price of avoiding further efforts at revolution.

In monarchies, moreover, succession can result in change and reform, rather than the destruction of the entire system. A dynastic succession is legitimate and may thus be welcomed rather than feared, as in a typical sultanistic state. For example, in Morocco in 1999, the public greeted King Mohammed VI's ascension to the throne with great hopes for change. And in fact, Mohammed VI has investigated some of the regime's previous legal abuses and worked to somewhat strengthen women's rights. He has calmed recent protests in Morocco by promising major constitutional reforms. In Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, rulers will likely to be able to stay in office if they are willing to share their power with elected officials or hand the reins to a younger family member who heralds significant reforms.

The regime most likely to avoid significant change in the near term is Iran. Although Iran has been called a sultanistic regime, it is different in several respects: unlike any other regime in the region, the ayatollahs espouse an ideology of anti-Western Shiism and Persian nationalism that draws

considerable support from ordinary people. This makes it more like a party-state with a mass base of support. Iran is also led by a combination of several strong leaders, not just one: Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Parliamentary Chair Ali Larijani. So there is no one corrupt or inefficient sultan on which to focus dissent. Finally, the Iranian regime enjoys the support of the Basij, an ideologically committed militia, and the Revolutionary Guards, which are deeply intertwined with the government. There is little chance that these forces will defect in the face of mass protests.

AFTER THE REVOLUTIONS

Those hoping for Tunisia and Egypt to make the transition to stable democracy quickly will likely be disappointed. Revolutions are just the beginning of a long process. Even after a peaceful revolution, it generally takes half a decade for any type of stable regime to consolidate. If a civil war or a counterrevolution arises (as appears to be happening in Libya), the reconstruction of the state takes still longer.

In general, after the post-revolutionary honeymoon period ends, divisions within the opposition start to surface. Although holding new elections is a straightforward step, election campaigns and then decisions taken by new legislatures will open debates over taxation and state spending, corruption, foreign policy, the role of the military, the powers of the president, official policy on religious law and practice, minority rights, and so on. As conservatives, populists, Islamists, and modernizing reformers fiercely vie for power in Tunisia, Egypt, and perhaps Libya, those countries will likely face lengthy periods of abrupt government turnovers and policy reversals -- similar to what occurred in the Philippines and many Eastern European countries after their revolutions.

Some Western governments, having long supported Ben Ali and Mubarak as bulwarks against a rising tide of radical Islam, now fear that Islamist groups are poised to take over. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is the best organized of the opposition groups there, and so stands to gain in open elections, particularly if elections are held soon, before other parties are organized. Yet the historical record of revolutions in sultanistic regimes should somewhat alleviate such concerns. Not a single sultan overthrown in the last 30 years -- including in Haiti, the Philippines, Romania, Zaire, Indonesia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan -- has been succeeded by an ideologically driven or radical government. Rather, in every case, the end product has been a flawed democracy -- often corrupt and prone to authoritarian tendencies, but not aggressive or extremist.

This marks a significant shift in world history. Between 1949 and 1979, every revolution against a sultanistic regime -- in China, Cuba, Vietnam, Cambodia, Iran, and Nicaragua -- resulted in a communist or an Islamist government. At the time, most intellectuals in the developing world favored the communist model of revolution against capitalist states. And in Iran, the desire to avoid both capitalism and communism and the increasing popularity of traditional Shiite clerical authority resulted in a push for an Islamist government. Yet since the 1980s, neither the communist nor the Islamist model has had much appeal. Both are widely perceived as failures at producing economic growth and popular accountability -- the two chief goals of all recent anti-sultanistic revolutions.

Noting that high unemployment spurred regime change, some in the United States have called for a Marshall Plan for the Middle East to stabilize the region. But in 1945, Europe had a history of prior democratic regimes and a devastated physical infrastructure that needed rebuilding. Tunisia and Egypt have intact economies with excellent recent growth records, but

they need to build new democratic institutions. Pouring money into these countries before they have created accountable governments would only fuel corruption and undermine their progress toward democracy.

What is more, the United States and other Western nations have little credibility in the Middle East given their long support for sultanistic dictators. Any efforts to use aid to back certain groups or influence electoral outcomes are likely to arouse suspicion. What the revolutionaries need from outsiders is vocal support for the process of democracy, a willingness to accept all groups that play by democratic rules, and a positive response to any requests for technical assistance in institution building.

The greatest risk that Tunisia and Egypt now face is an attempt at counterrevolution by military conservatives, a group that has often sought to claim power after a sultan has been removed. This occurred in Mexico after Díaz was overthrown, in Haiti after Jean-Claude Duvalier's departure, and in the Philippines after Marcos' fall. And after Suharto was forced from power in Indonesia, the military exerted its strength by cracking down on independence movements in East Timor, which Indonesia had occupied since 1975.

In the last few decades, attempted counterrevolutions (such as those in the Philippines in 1987–88 and Haiti in 2004) have largely fizzled out. They have not reversed democratic gains or driven post-sultanistic regimes into the arms of extremists -- religious or otherwise.

However, such attempts weaken new democracies and distract them from undertaking much-needed reforms. They can also provoke a radical reaction. If Tunisia's or Egypt's military attempts to claim power or block Islamists from participating in the new regime, or the region's monarchies seek to keep their regimes closed through repression rather

than open them up via reforms, radical forces will only be strengthened. As one example, the opposition in Bahrain, which had been seeking constitutional reforms, has reacted to Saudi action to repress its protests by calling for the overthrow of Bahrain's monarchy instead of its reform. Inclusiveness should be the order of the day.

The other main threat to democracies in the Middle East is war. Historically, revolutionary regimes have hardened and become more radical in response to international conflict. It was not the fall of the Bastille but war with Austria that gave the radical Jacobins power during the French Revolution. Similarly, it was Iran's war with Iraq that gave Ayotallah Ruhollah Khomeini the opportunity to drive out Iran's secular moderates. In fact, the one event that may cause radicals to hijack the Middle Eastern revolutions is if Israeli anxiety or Palestinian provocations escalate hostility between Egypt and Israel, leading to renewed war.

That said, there is still reason for optimism. Prior to 2011, the Middle East stood out on the map as the sole remaining region in the world virtually devoid of democracy. The Jasmine and Nile Revolutions look set to change all that. Whatever the final outcome, this much can be said: the rule of the sultans is coming to an end.

For further expert analysis of the uprisings across the Arab world, please check out Foreign Affairs/CFR new ebook, The New Arab Revolt: What Happened, What It Means, and What Comes Next. It is available for purchase in multiple formats including PDF, Kindle, and Nook.

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Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring

The Myth of Authoritarian Stability

F. Gregory Gause III

ZOUBEIR SOUISSI / REUTERS

Police officers stand outside the parliament in Tunis March 18, 2015.

The vast majority of academic specialists on the Arab world were as surprised as everyone else by the upheavals that toppled two Arab leaders last winter and that now threaten several others. It was clear that Arab regimes were deeply unpopular and faced serious demographic, economic, and political problems. Yet many academics focused on explaining what they saw as the most interesting and anomalous aspect of Arab politics: the persistence of undemocratic rulers.

Until this year, the Arab world boasted a long list of such leaders. Muammar al-Qaddafi took charge of Libya in 1969; the Assad family has ruled Syria since 1970; Ali Abdullah Saleh became president of North Yemen (later united with South Yemen) in 1978; Hosni Mubarak took charge of Egypt in 1981; and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali ascended to Tunisia's presidency in 1987. The monarchies enjoyed even longer pedigrees, with the Hashemites running Jordan since its creation in 1920, the al-Saud family ruling a unified Saudi Arabia since 1932, and the Alaouite dynasty in Morocco first coming to power in the seventeenth century.

These regimes survived over a period of decades in which democratic waves rolled through East Asia, eastern Europe, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. Even the Arab countries' neighbors in the Muslim Middle East (Iran and Turkey) experienced enormous political change in that period, with a revolution and three subsequent decades of political struggle in Iran and a quasi-Islamist party building a more open and democratic system in secular Turkey.

For many Middle East specialists, this remarkable record of regime stability in the face of numerous challenges demanded their attention and an explanation. I am one of those specialists. In the pages of this magazine in 2005 ("Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?" September/ October 2005), I argued that the United States should not encourage democracy in the Arab world because Washington's authoritarian Arab allies represented stable bets for the future. On that count, I was spectacularly wrong. I also predicted that democratic Arab governments would prove much less likely to cooperate with U.S. foreign policy goals in the region. This remains an open question. Although most of my colleagues expressed more support for U.S. efforts to encourage Arab political reform, I was hardly alone in my skepticism about the prospect of full-fledged democratic change in the face of these seemingly unshakable

authoritarian regimes.

Understanding what we missed and what we overestimated in our explanations of the stability of Arab authoritarianism -- and understanding why we did so -- is of more than just academic significance. Regional analysts must determine what changed in the forces that underpinned four decades of Arab regime stability and what new elements emerged to spark the current revolts. Doing so will allow U.S. policymakers to approach the Arab revolts more effectively by providing them insight into the factors that will drive postrevolutionary politics in the Arab world.

ARAB STATES AND THEIR MILITARIES

The first task is to establish what academia knew and did not know. To begin with, it is important to recognize that few, if any, political scientists working on the Middle East explained the peculiar stability of Arab regimes in cultural terms -- a sign of progress over the scholarship of earlier eras. The literature on how Arab dictators endured did not include old saws about how Islam is inimical to democracy or how Arab culture remains too patriarchal and traditional to support democratic change. We recognized how popular the concept of democracy was in the Arab world and that when given real electoral choices, Arabs turned out to vote in large numbers. We also understood that Arabs did not passively accept authoritarian rule. From Algeria to Saudi Arabia, Arab autocrats were able to stay in power over the past 40 years only by brutally suppressing popular attempts to unseat them, whether motivated by political repression or food prices. Arab citizens certainly demonstrated the desire and ability to mobilize against their governments. But those governments, before 2011, were extremely successful in co-opting and containing them.

As a result, academics directed their attention toward

explaining the mechanisms that Arab states had developed to weather popular dissent. Although different scholars focused on different aspects of this question, from domestic institutions to government strategies, most attributed the stability of Arab dictatorships to two common factors: the military-security complex and state control over the economy. In each of these areas, we in the academic community made assumptions that, as valid as they might have been in the past, turned out to be wrong in 2011.

Most scholars assumed that no daylight existed between the ruling regimes and their military and security services. That assumption was not unreasonable. Many Arab presidents served in uniform before they took office, including Ben Ali and Mubarak. In the wake of the Arab military coups of the 1950s and 1960s, Arab leaders created institutions to exercise political control over their armies and, in some cases, established rival military forces to balance the army's weight. Arab armies helped ruling regimes win their civil wars and put down uprisings. As a result, most Middle East experts came to assume that Arab armies and security services would never break with their rulers.

This assumption obviously proved incorrect. Scholars did not predict or appreciate the variable ways in which Arab armies would react to the massive, peaceful protests this year. This oversight occurred because, as a group, Middle East experts had largely lost interest in studying the role of the military in Arab politics. Although this topic once represented a central feature of U.S. scholarship on the Middle East -- when the Arab military coups of the 1950s and 1960s occupied the academics of that era -- the remarkable stability of the Arab regimes since then led us to assume that the issue was no longer important. Yet a preliminary review of the unfolding revolts suggests that two factors drive how Arab militaries react to public unrest: the social composition of both the regime and its military and the level of institutionalization and

professionalism in the army itself.

The countries in which the military, as an institution, sided with the protesters, Egypt and Tunisia, are two of the most homogeneous societies in the Arab world. Both are overwhelmingly Sunni. (The Coptic Christian minority in Egypt plays an important social role there but has little political clout.) Both the Egyptian and the Tunisian armies are relatively professional, with neither serving as the personal instrument of the ruler. Army leaders in both nations realized that their institutions could play an important role under new regimes and thus were willing to risk ushering out the old guard.

In Arab countries featuring less institutionalized forces, where the security services are led by and serve as the personal instruments of the ruler and his family, those forces have split or dissolved in the face of popular protests. In both Libya and Yemen, units led by the rulers' families have supported the regimes, while other units have defected to the opposition, stayed on the sidelines, or just gone home.

In divided societies, where the regime represents an ethnic, sectarian, or regional minority and has built an officer corps dominated by that overrepresented minority, the armies have thus far backed their regimes. The Sunni-led security forces in Bahrain, a Shiite-majority country, stood their ground against demonstrators to preserve the Sunni monarchy. The Jordanian army remains loyal to the monarchy despite unrest among the country's Palestinian majority. Saudi Arabia's National Guard, heavily recruited from central and western Arabian tribes, is standing by the central Arabian al-Saud dynasty. In each country, the logic is simple: if the regime falls and the majority takes over, the army leadership will likely be replaced as well.

The Syrian army's reaction to the crisis facing the Assad

regime will offer an important test of this hypothesis. Members of the Assad family command important army units, and Alawites and members of other minority groups staff a good portion of the officer corps in the Sunni-majority country. If minority solidarity with the regime endures, Assad is likely to retain power. Yet if disaffected officers begin to see the army as an instrument of the Assad family itself, they could bring down the regime. Either way, once the dust settles, Middle East scholars will need to reexamine their assumptions about the relationship between Arab states and their militaries -- perhaps the key element in determining regime survival in a crisis.

THE REFORM FACTOR

State control over the economy in the Middle East was another pillar of regime stability identified by academics. Scholars posited that Arab states with oil reserves and revenues deployed this wealth to control the economy, building patronage networks, providing social services, and directing the development of dependent private sectors. Through these funds, Arab rulers connected the interests of important constituencies to their survival and placated the rest of their citizens with handouts in times of crisis. Indeed, since the current uprisings began, only Libya among the major oil exporters (Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) has faced a serious challenge. Buoyed by high oil prices, the other oil exporters have been able to head off potential opposition by distributing resources through increased state salaries, higher subsidies for consumer goods, new state jobs, and direct handouts to citizens. Qaddafi's example establishes that oil money must be allocated properly, rather than wasted on pet projects and harebrained schemes, for it to protect a regime. The recent Arab revolts, then, would seem to validate this part of the academic paradigm on regime stability.

Yet this year's revolts have called the economic foundations of the regime stability argument into question when it comes to non-oil-producing states. Although Arab petrostates have relied on their oil revenues to avoid economic reform, changes in the world economy and the liberalizing requirements of foreign aid donors have over the past two decades forced non-oil-producing states to modernize their economies. A number of Arab regimes, including in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, have privatized state enterprises, encouraged foreign investment, created incentives to kick-start the private sector, and cut subsidies and state expenditures that previously consumed government budgets. Such Washington consensus-style economic reforms exacerbated inequalities and made life more difficult for the poor, but they also opened up new opportunities for local entrepreneurs and allowed the upper classes to enjoy greater consumer choice through liberalized trade regimes. Some Middle East specialists thought that economic liberalization could establish new bases of support for Arab authoritarians and encourage the economic growth necessary to grapple with the challenges of growing populations (as economic reforms in Turkey have led to greater support for the ruling Justice and Development Party there). Meanwhile, Western governments pushed the idea that economic reform represented a step toward political reform.

But these economic reforms backfired on those governments that embraced them most fully: Cairo and Tunis. Although both Egypt and Tunisia had achieved decent economic growth rates and received praise from the International Monetary Fund as recently as 2010, politically driven privatizations did not enhance the stability of their regimes. Instead, they created a new class of superwealthy entrepreneurs, including members of the presidents' families in both countries, which became the targets of popular ire. And the academics' assumption that these beneficiaries of economic reform would

support the authoritarian regimes proved chimerical. The state-bred tycoons either fled or were unable to stop events and landed in postrevolutionary prison. The upper-middle class did not demonstrate in favor of Ben Ali or Mubarak. In fact, some members became revolutionary leaders themselves.

It is supremely ironic that the face of the Egyptian revolt was Wael Ghonim, the Egyptian Google executive. He is exactly the kind of person who was poised to succeed in the Egypt of Mubarak -- bilingual, educated at the American University of Cairo, and at home in the global business world. Yet he risked his future and life to organize the "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook page, in memory of a man beaten to death by Egyptian police, which helped mobilize Egyptians against the regime. For him and many others in similar economic circumstances, political freedom outweighed monetary opportunity.

Seeing what happened in Cairo and Tunis, other Arab leaders rushed to placate their citizens by raising state salaries, canceling planned subsidy cuts, and increasing the number of state jobs. In Saudi Arabia, for example, in February and March, King Abdullah announced new spending plans of more than $100 billion. The Saudis have the oil money to fulfill such pledges. In non-oil-producing states, such as Jordan, which halted its march down the road of economic reform once the trouble began, governments may not have the money to maintain the old social contract, whereby the state provided basic economic security in exchange for loyalty. Newly liberated Egypt and Tunisia are also confronting their inherited economic woes. Empowered electorates will demand a redistribution of wealth that the governments do not have and a renegotiation of the old social contract that the governments cannot fund.

Many Middle East scholars recognized that the neoliberal

economic programs were causing political problems for Arab governments, but few foresaw their regime-shaking consequences. Academics overestimated both the ameliorating effect of the economic growth introduced by the reforms and the political clout of those who were benefiting from such policies. As a result, they underestimated the popular revulsion to the corruption and crony privatization that accompanied the reforms.

Oil wealth remains a fairly reliable tool for ensuring regime stability, at least when oil prices are high. Yet focused on how Arab regimes achieved stability through oil riches, Middle East scholars missed the destabilizing effects of poorly implemented liberal economic policies in the Arab world.

A NEW KIND OF PAN-ARABISM

Another factor missed by Middle East specialists had less to do with state policies and institutions than with cross-border Arab identity. It is not a coincidence that major political upheavals arose across the Arab world simultaneously. Arab activists and intellectuals carefully followed the protests of Iran's 2009 Green Movement, but no Arabs took to the streets in emulation of their Iranian neighbors. Yet in 2011, a month after a fruit vendor in Tunisia set himself on fire, the Arab world was engulfed in revolts. If any doubts remain that Arabs retain a sense of common political identity despite living in 20 different states, the events of this year should put them to rest.

Such strong pan-Arab sentiments should not have surprised the academic community. Much of the work on Arab politics in previous generations had focused on Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism, the ability of Arab leaders to mobilize political support across state borders based on the idea that all Arabs share a common political identity and fate. Yet many of us assumed that the cross-border appeal of Arab identity had

waned in recent years, especially following the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. Egypt and Jordan had signed treaties with Israel, and the Palestinians and Syria had engaged in direct negotiations with Israel, breaking a cardinal taboo of pan-Arabism. U.S.-led wars against Iraq in 1990-91 and beginning in 2003 excited opposition in the Arab world but did not destabilize the governments that cooperated with the U.S. military plans -- a sign of waning pan-Arabism as much as government immunity to popular sentiment. It seemed that Arab states had become strong enough (with some exceptions, such as Lebanon and post-Saddam Hussein Iraq) to fend off ideological pressures from across their borders. Most Middle East scholars believed that pan-Arabism had gone dormant.

They thus missed the communal wave of 2011. Although the events of this year demonstrate the continued importance of Arab identity, pan-Arabism has taken a very different form than it did a half century ago under the leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Then, Nasser, a charismatic leader with a powerful government, promoted popular ideas and drove events in other countries, using the new technology of his day, the transistor radio, to call on Arabs to oppose their own governments and follow him. Now, the very leaderless quality of the popular mobilizations in Egypt and Tunisia seems to have made them sources of inspiration across the Arab world.

In recent decades, Arab leaders, most notably Saddam during the Gulf War, have attempted to embrace Nasser's mantle and spark popular Arab movements. Even the Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini -- a Persian, not an Arab -- appealed to Islam to mobilize Arabs behind his banner. All these attempts failed. When the people of Tunisia and then Egypt overthrew their corrupt dictators, however, other Arabs found they could identify with them. The fact that these revolts succeeded gave hope (in some cases, such as in

Bahrain, false hope) to other Arabs that they could do the same. The common enemy of the 2011 Arab revolts is not colonialism, U.S. power, or Israel, but Arabs' own rulers.

Academics will need to assess the restored importance of Arab identity to understand the future of Middle East politics. Unlike its predecessor, the new pan-Arabism does not appear to challenge the regional map. Arabs are not demonstrating to dissolve their states into one Arab entity; their agendas are almost exclusively domestic. But the Arab revolts have shown that what happens in one Arab state can affect others in unanticipated and powerful ways. As a result, scholars and policymakers can no longer approach countries on a case-by-case basis. The United States will have a hard time supporting democracy in one Arab country, such as Egypt, while standing by as other allies, such as Bahrain, crush peaceful democratic protests.

In addition, the new pan-Arabism will eventually bring the issue of Arab-Israeli peace back to the fore. Although none of the 2011 Arab revolts occurred in the name of the Palestinians, democratic Arab regimes will have to reflect popular opinion on Israel, which remains extremely low. Arab public opinion on the United States is influenced by Arabs' views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as much as by U.S. actions in other Arab countries. As a result, the United States will need to reactivate Israeli-Palestinian peace talks to anticipate the demands of Arab publics across the Middle East.

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

Academic specialists on Arab politics, such as myself, have quite a bit of rethinking to do. That is both intellectually exciting and frightening. Explaining the stability of Arab authoritarians was an important analytic task, but it led some of us to underestimate the forces for change that were

bubbling below, and at times above, the surface of Arab politics. It is impossible for social scientists to make precise predictions about the Arab world, and this should not be a goal. But academics must reexamine their assumptions on a number of issues, including the military's role in Arab politics, the effects of economic change on political stability, and the salience of a cross-border Arab identity, to get a sense of how Arab politics will now unfold.

As paradigms fall and theories are shredded by events on the ground, it is useful to recall that the Arab revolts resulted not from policy decisions taken in Washington or any other foreign capital but from indigenous economic, political, and social factors whose dynamics were extremely hard to forecast. In the wake of such unexpected upheavals, both academics and policymakers should approach the Arab world with humility about their ability to shape its future. That is best left to Arabs themselves.

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The Arab Spring at One

A Year of Living Dangerously

Fouad Ajami

REUTERS / AMR DALSH

Free at last: protesting in Tahrir Square, Cairo, December 21, 2011

Throughout 2011, a rhythmic chant echoed across the Arab lands: "The people want to topple the regime." It skipped borders with ease, carried in newspapers and magazines, on Twitter and Facebook, on the airwaves of al Jazeera and al Arabiya. Arab nationalism had been written off, but here, in full bloom, was what certainly looked like a pan-Arab awakening. Young people in search of political freedom and economic opportunity, weary of waking up to the same tedium day after day, rose up against their sclerotic masters.

It came as a surprise. For almost two generations, waves of

democracy had swept over other regions, from southern and eastern Europe to Latin America, from East Asia to Africa. But not the Middle East. There, tyrants had closed up the political world, become owners of their countries in all but name. It was a bleak landscape: terrible rulers, sullen populations, a terrorist fringe that hurled itself in frustration at an order bereft of any legitimacy. Arabs had started to feel they were cursed, doomed to despotism. The region's exceptionalism was becoming not just a human disaster but a moral embarrassment.

Outside powers had winked at this reality, silently thinking this was the best the Arabs could do. In a sudden burst of Wilsonianism in Iraq and after, the United States had put its power behind liberty. Saddam Hussein was flushed out of a spider hole, the Syrian brigades of terror and extortion were pushed out of Lebanon, and the despotism of Hosni Mubarak, long a pillar of Pax Americana, seemed to lose some of its mastery. But post-Saddam Iraq held out mixed messages: there was democracy, but also blood in the streets and sectarianism. The autocracies hunkered down and did their best to thwart the new Iraqi project. Iraq was set ablaze, and the Arab autocrats could point to it as a cautionary tale of the folly of unseating even the worst of despots. Moreover, Iraq carried a double burden of humiliation for Sunni Arabs: the bearer of liberty there was the United States, and the war had empowered the Shiite stepchildren of the Arab world. The result was a standoff: the Arabs could not snuff out or ignore the flicker of freedom, but nor did the Iraqi example prove the subversive beacon of hope its proponents had expected.

It was said by Arabs themselves that George W. Bush had unleashed a tsunami on the region. True, but the Arabs were good at waiting out storms, and before long, the Americans themselves lost heart and abandoned the quest. An election in 2006 in the Palestinian territories went the way of Hamas, and a new disillusionment with democracy's verdict overtook

the Bush administration. The "surge" in Iraq rescued the American war there just in time, but the more ambitious vision of reforming the Arab world was given up. The autocracies had survived the brief moment of American assertiveness. And soon, a new standard-bearer of American power, Barack Obama, came with a reassuring message: the United States was done with change; it would make its peace with the status quo, renewing its partnership with friendly autocrats even as it engaged the hostile regimes in Damascus and Tehran. The United States was to remain on the Kabul hook for a while longer, but the greater Middle East would be left to its Furies.

When a revolt erupted in Iran against the theocrats in the first summer of his presidency, Obama was caught flatfooted by the turmoil. Determined to conciliate the rulers, he could not find the language to speak to the rebels. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime, which had given up its dominion in Lebanon under duress, was now keen to retrieve it. A stealth campaign of terror and assassinations, the power of Hezbollah on the ground, and the subsidies of Iran all but snuffed out the "Cedar Revolution" that had been the pride of Bush's diplomacy.

Observers looking at the balance of forces in the region in late 2010 would have been smart to bet on a perpetuation of autocracy. Beholding Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, they would have been forgiven the conclusion that a similar fate awaited Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and the large Egyptian state that had been the trendsetter in Arab political and cultural life. Yet beneath the surface stability, there was political misery and sterility. Arabs did not need a "human development report" to tell them of their desolation. Consent had drained out of public life; the only glue between ruler and ruled was suspicion and fear. There was no public project to bequeath to a generation coming into its own -- and this the largest and youngest population yet.

And then it happened. In December, a despairing Tunisian fruit vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi took one way out, setting himself on fire to protest the injustices of the status quo. Soon, millions of his unnamed fellows took another, pouring into the streets. Suddenly, the despots, seemingly secure in their dominion, deities in all but name, were on the run. For its part, the United States scurried to catch up with the upheaval. "In too many places, in too many ways, the region's foundations are sinking into the sand," U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed in Qatar in mid-January 2011, as the storm was breaking out. The Arab landscape lent her remarks ample confirmation; what she omitted was that generations of American diplomacy would be buried, too.

THE FIRE THIS TIME

The revolt was a settlement of accounts between the powers that be and populations determined to be done with despots. It erupted in a small country on the margins of the Arab political experience, more educated and prosperous and linked to Europe than the norm. As the rebellion made its way eastward, it skipped Libya and arrived in Cairo, "the mother of the world." There, it found a stage worthy of its ambitions.

Often written off as the quintessential land of political submission, Egypt has actually known ferocious rebellions. It had been Mubarak's good fortune that the land tolerated him for three decades. The designated successor to Anwar al-Sadat, Mubarak had been a cautious man, but his reign had sprouted dynastic ambitions. For 18 magical days in January and February, Egyptians of all walks of life came together in Tahrir Square demanding to be rid of him. The senior commanders of the armed forces cast him aside, and he joined his fellow despot, Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who had fallen a month earlier.

From Cairo, the awakening became a pan-Arab affair, catching fire in Yemen and Bahrain. As a monarchy, the latter was a rare exception, since in this season it was chiefly the republics of strongmen that were seized with unrest. But where most monarchies had a fit between ruler and ruled, Bahrain was riven by a fault line between its Sunni rulers and its Shiite majority. So it was vulnerable, and it was in the nature of things that an eruption there would turn into a sectarian feud. Yemen, meanwhile, was the poorest of the Arab states, with secessionist movements raging in its north and south and a polarizing leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had no skills save the art of political survival. The feuds of Yemen were obscure, the quarrels of tribes and warlords. The wider Arab tumult gave Yemenis eager to be rid of their ruler the heart to challenge him.

Then, the revolt doubled back to Libya. This was the kingdom of silence, the realm of the deranged, self-proclaimed "dean of Arab rulers," Muammar al-Qaddafi. For four tormenting decades, Libyans had been at the mercy of this prison warden, part tyrant, part buffoon. Qaddafi had eviscerated his country, the richest in Africa yet with an abysmally impoverished population. In the interwar years, Libya had known savage colonial rule under the Italians. It gained a brief respite under an ascetic ruler, King Idris, but in the late 1960s was gripped by a revolutionary fever. Iblis wa la Idris, went the maxim of the time, "Better the devil than Idris." And the country got what it wanted. Oil sustained the madness; European leaders and American intellectuals alike came courting. Now, in 2011, Benghazi, at some remove from the capital, rose up, and history gave the Libyans a chance.

The Egyptian rulers had said that their country was not Tunisia. Qaddafi said that his republic was not Tunisia or Egypt. Eventually, Assad was saying that Syria was not Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya. Assad was young, not old; his regime had more legitimacy because it had confronted Israel rather

than collaborated with it. He spoke too soon: in mid-March, it was Syria's turn.

Syria was where Islam had made its home after it outgrew the Arabian Peninsula and before it slipped out of the hands of the Arabs into those of the Persians and the Turks. Yet decades earlier, Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez -- a man of supreme cunning and political skill -- had ridden the military and the Baath Party to absolute power, creating a regime in which power rested with the country's Alawite minority. The marriage of despotism and sectarianism begat the most fearsome state in the Arab east.

When the rebellion broke out there in 2011, it had a distinct geography, as the French political scientist Fabrice Balanche has shown, based in the territories and urban quarters of the country's Sunni Arabs. It erupted in Dara'a, a remote provincial town in the south, then spread to Hamah, Homs, Jisr al-Shughour, Rastan, Idlib, and Dayr az Zawr -- skipping over Kurdish and Druze areas and the mountain villages and coastal towns that make up the Alawite strongholds. The violence in the Syrian uprising has been most pronounced in Homs, the country's third-largest city, because of its explosive demographics -- two-thirds Sunni, one-quarter Alawite, one-tenth Christian.

Sectarianism was not all, of course. Syria has had one of the highest birthrates in the region, with its population having almost quadrupled since Hafez seized power in 1970. The arteries of the regime had hardened, with a military-merchant complex dominating political and economic life. There was not much patronage left for the state to dispose of, since under the banner of privatization in recent years, the state had pulled off a disappearing act. The revolt fused a sense of economic disinheritance and the wrath of a Sunni majority determined to rid itself of the rule of a godless lot.

WHERE THINGS STAND

There has, of course, been no uniform script for the Arab regimes in play. Tunisia, an old state with a defined national identity, settled its affairs with relative ease. It elected a constituent assembly in which al Nahda, an Islamist party, secured a plurality. Al Nahda's leader, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, was a shrewd man; years in exile had taught him caution, and his party formed a coalition government with two secular partners.

In Libya, foreign intervention helped the rebels topple the regime. Qaddafi was pulled out of a drainage pipe and beaten and murdered, and so was one of his sons. These were the hatreds and the wrath that the ruler himself had planted; he reaped what he had sown. But wealth, a sparse population, and foreign attention should see Libya through. No history in the making there could be as deadly to Libyans, and others, as the Qaddafi years.

The shadows of Iran and Saudi Arabia hover over Bahrain. There is no mass terror, but the political order is not pretty. There is sectarian discrimination and the oddness of a ruling dynasty, the House of Khalifa, that conquered the area in the late years of the eighteenth century but has still not made peace with the population. Outsiders man the security forces, and true stability seems a long way off.

As for Yemen, it is the quintessential failed state. The footprint of the government is light, the rulers offer no redemption, but there is no draconian terror. The country is running out of water; jihadists on the run from the Hindu Kush have found a home: it is Afghanistan with a coastline. The men and women who went out into the streets of Sanaa in 2011 sought the rehabilitation of their country, a more dignified politics than they have been getting from the cynical acrobat at the helm for more than three decades. Whether

they will get it is unclear.

Syria remains in chaos. Hamas left Damascus in December because it feared being left on the wrong side of the mounting Arab consensus against the Syrian regime. "No Iran, no Hezbollah; we want rulers who fear Allah," has been one of the more meaningful chants of the protesters. Alawite rule has been an anomaly, and the regime, through its brutal response to the uprising, with security forces desecrating mosques, firing at worshipers, and ordering hapless captives to proclaim, "There is no God but Bashar," has written its own regional banishment. Hafez committed cruelties of his own, but he always managed to remain within the Arab fold. Bashar is different -- reckless -- and has prompted even the Arab League, which has a history of overlooking the follies of its members, to suspend Damascus' membership.

The fight still rages, Aleppo and Damascus have not risen, and the embattled ruler appears convinced that he can resist the laws of gravity. Unlike in Libya, no foreign rescue mission is on the horizon. But with all the uncertainties, this much can be said: the fearsome security state that Hafez, the Baath Party, and the Alawite soldiers and intelligence barons built is gone for good. When consent and popular enthusiasm fell away, the state rested on fear, and fear was defeated. In Syria, the bonds between the holders of power and the population have been irreparably broken.

WHAT FOLLOWS PHARAOH

Egypt, meanwhile, may have lost the luster of old, but this Arab time shall be judged by what eventually happens there. In the scenarios of catastrophe, the revolution will spawn an Islamic republic: the Copts will flee, tourism revenues be lost for good, and Egyptians will yearn for the iron grip of a pharaoh. The strong performance of the Muslim Brotherhood and of an even more extremist Salafi party in recent

parliamentary elections, together with the splintering of the secular, liberal vote, appears to justify concern about the country's direction. But Egyptians have proud memories of liberal periods in their history. Six decades of military rule robbed them of the experience of open politics, and they are unlikely to give it up now without a struggle.

The elections were transparent and clarifying. Liberal and secular forces were not ready for the contest, whereas the Brotherhood had been waiting for such a historic moment for decades and seized its opportunity. No sooner had the Salafists come out of the catacombs than they began to unnerve the population, and so they pulled back somewhat from their extreme positions. The events in Tahrir Square transfixed the world, but as the young Egyptian intellectual Samuel Tadros has put it, "Egypt is not Cairo and Cairo is not Tahrir Square." When the dust settles, three forces will contest Egypt's future -- the army, the Brotherhood, and a broad liberal and secular coalition of those who want a civil polity, the separation of religion and politics, and the saving graces of a normal political life.

The Brotherhood brings to the struggle its time-honored mix of political cunning and an essential commitment to imposing a political order shaped by Islam. Its founder, Hasan al-Banna, was struck down by an assassin in 1949 but still stalks the politics of the Muslim world. A ceaseless plotter, he talked of God's rule, but in the shadows, he struck deals with the palace against the dominant political party of his day, the Wafd. He played the political game as he put together a formidable paramilitary force, seeking to penetrate the officer corps -- something his inheritors have pined for ever since. He would doubtless look with admiration on the tactical skills of his successors as they maneuver between the liberals and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, partaking of the tumult of Tahrir Square but stepping back from the exuberance to underline their commitment to sobriety and

public order.

The plain truth of it is that Egypt lacks the economic wherewithal to build a successful modern Islamic order, whatever that might mean. The Islamic Republic of Iran rests on oil, and even the moderate ascendancy of the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, in Turkey is secured by prosperity stemming from the "devout bourgeoisie" in the Anatolian hill towns. Egypt lies at the crossroads of the world, living off tourism, the Suez Canal, infusions of foreign aid, and remittances from Egyptians abroad. Virtue must bow to necessity: in the last year, the country's foreign reserves dwindled from $36 billion to $20 billion. Inflation hammers at the door, the price of imported wheat is high, and the bills have to be paid. Four finance ministers have come and gone since Mubarak's fall. A desire for stability now balances the heady satisfaction that a despot was brought down.

There are monumental problems staring Egypt's leaders in the face, and the reluctance of both the Brotherhood and the armed forces to assume power is telling. Good sense and pragmatism might yet prevail. A plausible division of spoils and responsibility might give the Brotherhood the domains of governance dearest to it -- education, social welfare, and the judiciary -- with the military getting defense, intelligence, the peace with Israel, the military ties to the United States, and a retention of the officer corps' economic prerogatives. Liberal secularists would have large numbers, a say in the rhythm of daily life in a country so hard to regiment and organize, and the chance to field a compelling potential leader in a future presidential election.

For two centuries now, Egypt has been engaged in a Sisyphean struggle for modernity and a place among the nations worthy of its ambitions. It has not fared well, yet it continues to try. Last August, a scene played out that could give Egyptians a measure of solace. The country's last

pharaoh -- may it be so -- came to court on a gurney. "Sir, I am present," the former ruler said to the presiding judge. Mubarak was not pulled out of a drainage pipe and slaughtered, as was Qaddafi, nor did he hunker down with his family and murder his own people at will, as has Assad. The Egyptians have always had, in E. M. Forster's words, the ability to harmonize contending assertions, and they may do so once again.

THE THIRD GREAT AWAKENING

This tumult, this awakening, is the third of its kind in modern Arab history. The first, a political-cultural renaissance born of a desire to join the modern world, came in the late 1800s. Led by scribes and lawyers, would-be parliamentarians and Christian intellectuals, it sought to reform political life, separate religion from politics, emancipate women, and move past the debris of the Ottoman Empire. Fittingly enough, that great movement, with Beirut and Cairo at the head of the pack, found its chronicler in George Antonius, a Christian writer of Lebanese birth, Alexandrian youth, a Cambridge education, and service in the British administration in Palestine. His 1938 book, The Arab Awakening, remains the principal manifesto of Arab nationalism.

The second awakening came in the 1950s and gathered force in the decade following. This was the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia, and the early leaders of the Baath Party in Iraq and Syria. No democrats, the leaders of that time were intensely political men engaged in the great issues of the day. They came from the middle class or even lower and had dreams of power, of industrialization, of ridding their people of the sense of inferiority instilled by Ottoman and then colonial rule. No simple audit can do these men justice: they had monumental accomplishments, but then, explosive demographics and their own authoritarian proclivities and shortcomings undid most of

their work. When they faltered, police states and political Islam filled the void.

This third awakening came in the nick of time. The Arab world had grown morose and menacing. Its populations loathed their rulers and those leaders' foreign patrons. Bands of jihadists, forged in the cruel prisons of dreadful regimes, were scattered about everywhere looking to kill and be killed. Mohamed Bouazizi summoned his fellows to a new history, and across the region, millions have heeded his call. Last June, the Algerian author Boualem Sansal wrote Bouazizi an open letter. "Dear Brother," it said,

> *I write these few lines to let you know we're doing well, on the whole, though it varies from day to day: sometimes the wind changes, it rains lead, life bleeds from every pore. . . .*

> *But let's take the long view for a moment. Can he who does not know where to go find the way? Is driving the dictator out the end? From where you are, Mohamed, next to God, you can tell that not all roads lead to Rome; ousting a tyrant doesn't lead to freedom. Prisoners like trading one prison for another, for a change of scenery and the chance to gain a little something along the way.*

"The best day after a bad emperor is the first," the Roman historian Tacitus once memorably observed. This third Arab awakening is in the scales of history. It has in it both peril and promise, the possibility of prison but also the possibility of freedom.

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The Promise of the Arab Spring

In Political Development, No Gain Without Pain

Sheri Berman

Two years after the outbreak of what has come to be known as the Arab Spring, the bloom is off the rose. Fledgling democracies in North Africa are struggling to move forward or even maintain control, government crackdowns in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere have kept liberalization at bay, and Syria is slipping ever deeper into a vicious civil war that threatens to ignite the Middle East. Instead of widespread elation about democracy finally coming to the region, one now hears pessimism about the many obstacles in the way, fear about what will happen next, and even open nostalgia for the

old authoritarian order. Last June, when the Egyptian military dismissed parliament and tried to turn back the clock by gutting the civilian presidency, The Wall Street Journal's chief foreign policy columnist cracked, "Let's hope it works." (It didn't.) And Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's attempted power grab in November made such nostalgia commonplace.

The skepticism is as predictable as it is misguided. Every surge of democratization over the last century -- after World War I, after World War II, during the so called third wave in recent decades -- has been followed by an undertow, accompanied by widespread questioning of the viability and even desirability of democratic governance in the areas in question. As soon as political progress stalls, a conservative reaction sets in as critics lament the turbulence of the new era and look back wistfully to the supposed stability and security of its authoritarian predecessor. One would have hoped that by now people would know better -- that they would understand that this is what political development actually looks like, what it has always looked like, in the West just as much as in the Middle East, and that the only way ahead is to plunge forward rather than turn back.

The first error critics make is treating new democracies as blank slates, ignoring how much of their dynamics and fate are inherited rather than chosen. Turmoil, violence, and corruption are taken as evidence of the inherent dysfunctionality of democracy itself, or of the immaturity or irrationality of a particular population, rather than as a sign of the previous dictatorship's pathologies. Because authoritarian regimes lack popular legitimacy, they often manipulate and deepen communal cleavages in order to divide potential opponents and generate support among favored groups. So when democratization occurs, the pent-up distrust and animosity often explode. And because authoritarian regimes rule by command rather than consensus, they suppress dissent and block the creation of

political and social institutions that allow for the regular, peaceful articulation and organization of popular demands. So citizens in new democracies often express their grievances in a volatile and disorganized way, through a dizzying array of parties, extremist rhetoric and behavior, and street protests and even battles.

All these dynamics have been present in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In Egypt, for example, the regimes of Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak refused to allow the development of real political parties or many independent civil-society associations, which helps explain why Islamism is such a dominant political force there now. Religious organizations were among the only forums in which average citizens could express themselves or participate actively in the lives of their communities, and so when Mubarak fell and the transition occurred, only Islamists had the infrastructure in place to mobilize supporters effectively. The underdevelopment of other civil-society and political organizations, in turn, meant that once the dictatorship disintegrated, there were few institutions capable of channeling, much less responding to, popular grievances -- which explains the current lack of strong non-Islamist political parties and the tendency of Egyptians to take to the streets to express their demands and dissatisfaction. Morsi's November move to escape judicial review of his edicts reflects a broader Islamist distrust of Egyptian courts, due in part to the absence of reliable rule of law during the Mubarak era, just as the inability of the anti-Mubarak forces to work together today reflects their fractured, poisoned history under the previous tyranny. As Ahmed Mekky, the justice minister, said of the judicial-review controversy, "I blame all of Egypt, because they do not know how to talk to each other" -- which was precisely Mubarak's goal.

Similar stories could be told of other Middle Eastern dictatorships. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein deliberately pitted

different sectors of his population directly against one another as a way to tie certain groups to the regime and weaken any potential opposition. This practice, along with the regime's complete suppression of normal political or civil-society activity, meant that Iraq was only steps away from slipping into violent chaos once his regime was toppled -- a process the United States facilitated by failing to help provide an effective new order to replace the old one. In Libya, Muammar al-Qaddafi ruled through a bizarre personalized dictatorship that left his country almost entirely stateless after his ouster, paving the way for the struggle of the new government in Tripoli to establish order throughout its domain. And in Syria, the Assad family's dictatorship has favored the country's Alawite minority at the expense of other communities, setting the stage for communal strife as the Assads' rule disintegrates.

In addition to blaming new democratic regimes for the sins of their authoritarian predecessors, critics also set absurdly high benchmarks for success, ones that lack any historical perspective. They interpret post-transition violence, corruption, confusion, and incompetence as signs that particular countries (or even entire regions or religions) are not ready for democracy, as if normal democratic transitions lead smoothly and directly to stable liberal outcomes and countries that stumble along the way must have something wrong with them. In fact, stable liberal democracy usually emerges only at the end of long, often violent struggles, with many twists, turns, false starts, and detours.

These troubles, moreover, are not a bug but a feature -- not signs of problems with democracy but evidence of the difficult, messy process of political development through which societies purge themselves of the vestiges of dictatorship and construct new and better democratic orders. Stable liberal democracy requires more than just a shift in political forms; it also involves eliminating the antidemocratic

social, cultural, and economic legacies of the old regime. Such a process takes lots of time and effort, over multiple tries. Historically, most initial transitions have been the beginning of the democratization process, not the end of it -- something that the tortured histories of today's mature liberal democracies make clear.

FRENCH LESSONS

Take France. Just as the Arab Spring and other recent waves of global democratization were greeted with jubilation by observers around the globe, so, too, was the collapse of France's hereditary dictatorship in 1789. In The Prelude, William Wordsworth remembered the time as one when Europe "was thrilled with joy, / France standing on the top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again." Yet despite the initial optimism, the transition soon went awry. In 1791, with the proclamation of a constitutional monarchy, France made its first attempt to create a new political order, but this moderate political regime was rejected by both reactionaries and radicals. The latter soon gained the upper hand, and in 1793, they executed the king and declared a republic with universal suffrage and a commitment to a broad range of civil and political rights. Then, Europe's first modern democracy descended quickly into what came to be called the Reign of Terror, in which 20,000–40,000 people were executed for "counterrevolutionary" activities.

The British political theorist Edmund Burke was only the most well known of the conservative critics who argued that these experiences showed the dangers of radical political change and the need for elites and institutions to restrain mass passions. But Burke and the other critics were wrong. The conflict, chaos, and violence that followed the French Revolution were not the inexorable result of either democracy per se or the immaturity of the French masses; rather, they stemmed from the way the previous dictatorship had ruled.

The ancien régime in France had rested on an alliance between the king and a narrow slice of society, primarily the nobility. In order to keep the aristocrats' support, French kings bought them off with various financial benefits and privileges, including pensions, patronage, special legal treatment, access to lucrative commercial opportunities, and exemption from taxation. This system allowed the Bourbons to stabilize the country and begin building a modern, centralized state. But it also created the widespread popular perception that French nobles were parasites who extracted resources from the state while exploiting the peasantry.

The ancien régime, in short, rested on an extremely narrow social base, with the king and the nobility locked in an unhealthy embrace that created resentment and conflict between the lower orders and the privileged sectors of society. As the scholar Hilton Root has noted, this led to a "society divided into closed, self-regarding groups" -- and the members of these groups, as Alexis de Tocqueville quotes one of Louis XVI's own ministers as saying, had "so few links between themselves that everyone thinks solely of his own interests, no trace of any feeling for the public weal is anywhere to be found."

By the second half of the eighteenth century, thanks largely to several expensive and disastrous wars, the French state was in grave fiscal trouble. Unwilling to raise taxes on the favored rich, the regime resorted to borrowing more and more, and by the 1780s, its debt burden had become unsustainable. When the king was finally forced to call a national assembly in 1789 to try to deal with the country's problems, the long-simmering conflicts within and among different socioeconomic groups burst into the open, and France was set on the path to both revolution and postrevolutionary turmoil.

If France's first democratic experiment failed, it nevertheless

made a profound contribution to the eventual formation of a stable liberal democracy. Economically, the revolution replaced a patronage system based on pseudo-feudal hierarchies with a market system based on private property and equality before the law. Socially, it replaced a society structured by functionally different hereditary groups (nobles, peasants, and so forth) with a nation composed of equal citizens. Politically, it changed popular attitudes to citizenship, rights, and legitimate governance. And it dramatically accelerated the state's modernization, replacing a welter of local arrangements and fiefdoms with a national bureaucracy and national taxation system. The revolution and its aftermath, in short, turned out to be the crucial first steps in a century-and-a-half-long struggle to get rid of the ancien régime and put something better and more democratic in its place.

THE ITALIAN JOB

Italy, meanwhile, democratized just before World War I. The new regime was plagued by social conflict and political instability from the start, and the problems were exacerbated by the war's difficult aftermath. In 1919–20, about 1.3 million urban and industrial workers marched off the job and declared that they, rather than the owners and managers, were now in charge of the factories. The situation in rural areas was perhaps even more chaotic, as peasants and agricultural workers seized unoccupied or underutilized property and large landowners responded by hiring private militias to keep the rebellious lower orders in check. The country's two largest political parties, representing Catholics and Socialists, respectively, were unable or unwilling either to work together or to commit unequivocally to democracy, making it impossible to build stable, effective governments. Many Italians quickly grew fed up with the constant conflict and political instability and blamed democracy itself for the country's problems. And in October 1922, the antidemocrats

got what they wanted when the Italian king, urged on by conservatives, terminated the democratic experiment and turned the country over to the dynamic leader of the radical right, Benito Mussolini.

The shift to fascism was applauded by many both within Italy and without who believed that dictatorship offered a better chance of providing the stability and development that the country so desperately needed. And Mussolini's first years in office only increased his celebrity and acclaim. But the adulation was misplaced. The short-lived democratic regime had been more attractive than its fascist successor; its problems, moreover, were caused mostly by its own nondemocratic predecessor, which had deliberately divided and manipulated the Italian public and refused to allow the routine expression of popular demands and discontent.

Only a few decades earlier, the Italian peninsula had been home to a large number of separate states with different political, economic, social, and cultural histories. Poor transportation networks and the lack of a common language meant that most inhabitants of the region knew and cared little about one another. And when unification did occur, in the 1860s, it was the result not of a mass popular uprising but of decisions from above, made by the leaders of Piedmont, the peninsula's most powerful state. The Piedmontese imposed what was essentially a foreign political system (their own) on the rest of the area, and as a result, the new Italian state met immediate resistance -- from communities that felt colonized and exploited by Piedmont and from the Catholic Church, which rejected the idea of a superior secular authority governing the lives of Italians.

Lacking the ability and perhaps the desire to cultivate the support of the masses, Italian political elites ruled the new country through a system that came to be known as trasformismo, which involved co-opting certain favored

groups into the political order via the spoils system. The master of this method was Giovanni Giolitti, Italy's prime minister at various points between 1892 and 1921, who used the extension and withholding of state patronage and backroom deals to reward or punish key constituencies. Institutionalized corruption, in other words, was embedded in the heart of the young Italian state from early on, something that had profound consequences for the country's subsequent political development.

Since the formal institutions of Italian politics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries -- elections and parliament -- were clearly not the true arbiter of political power in the country, many groups in Italian society lost interest in them and began organizing outside or even against them. The arbitrary exclusion of certain groups from power, moreover, generated resentment and frustration. And because the political system was not responsive to popular concerns and demands, the divisions within Italian society were not dealt with either consistently or effectively.

All this meant that when a full transition to democracy finally occurred, the new regime started life with a vast array of problems. The chaos, conflict, and violence that plagued Italy in the years before Mussolini came to power, in other words, were caused not by too much democracy then (as critics claimed) but by too little earlier. The country's fascist interlude was a step back rather than a step forward, and when Italian democracy was restored after World War II, it was able to benefit from its trial run and pick up where the earlier democratic experiment had left off.

MODEL GERMANY

Germany democratized in the democratic wave that swept across Europe after World War I, and the young Weimar Republic was also burdened from birth by social conflict,

political instability, and extremism. Within months of the republic's founding, local Communists declared a Soviet republic in Bavaria, which was soon overthrown by the Freikorps, right-wing militias largely beyond the central government's control. The Freikorps then continued their rampages, engaging in assassinations and violent demonstrations and eventually supporting an attempted coup in 1920; other right-wing uprisings, including Hitler's infamous 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, followed, as did left-wing rebellions. And to top it off, the government's default on reparations debts in 1923 caused the Belgians and the French to seize control of the Ruhr, setting off the Great Inflation -- which ended up destroying the German middle classes and further delegitimizing the government and other mainstream political institutions.

Some stabilization did occur in the late 1920s, but the republic barely had time to breathe before it was buffeted by the Great Depression. When mainstream political forces dithered in the face of looming economic and political catastrophe, extremists gained ground, and in the fall of 1932, the Nazis became the largest party in the country, having run on a platform marrying attacks on democracy with promises to tackle capitalism's problems and heal the country's social divisions. In January 1933, Hitler was offered the chancellorship, and Germany's democratic experiment came to an end.

Echoing the fears and analyses of Burke and others, hordes of conservative critics claimed that Weimar and other failed interwar democratic experiments showed that democracy and mass political participation more generally were disasters waiting to happen. Only authoritarian political systems ruled by a strong leader, they claimed, could ensure order and discipline and head off social strife, political instability, and moral permissiveness. Once again, however, the critics were wrong. Weimar's fate had less to do with any inherent

problems of democracy or what the Spanish writer José Ortega y Gasset called "mass man" than it did with the tragic legacy of previous German authoritarianism.

Modern Germany emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century unified from above under the auspices of its most powerful state, the conservative and militaristic Prussia. The government was run by a chancellor who reported to a hereditary monarch, the kaiser, rather than to the public at large, and there were two legislative houses, an upper one dominated by Prussian conservatives and a lower one elected by universal suffrage. The chancellor did not require mass support to stay in power, but he did require it to pass major legislation. This soft authoritarian or mixed regime created strong incentives for rulers to manipulate politics in order to gain what they wanted while keeping opponents off balance and on the defensive. Otto von Bismarck, who served as chancellor for nearly two decades, was a master of this balancing act, holding together a conservative, antidemocratic coalition of the large landowning Junker aristocracy and heavy industrialists while dividing, suppressing, and demonizing his Catholic and Socialist opponents and deepening divisions across the country. Bismarck's "enemies of the state" policy also exerted a pernicious influence on German nationalism, helping cement the idea that Germany faced dangers within as well as without.

The result was a Germany unified politically but increasingly divided against itself socially, with a warped sense of nationalism, a paranoia about internal as well as external enemies, and rising levels of frustration and extremism (since the nondemocratic government proved unable or unwilling to respond to public needs and demands). When a full transition to democracy finally occurred in the wake of Germany's defeat in 1918, therefore, the new regime inherited many crippling legacies from its predecessor, including deliberately

falsified blame for the loss of the war and all the political, economic, and psychological consequences that flowed from it.

In Germany, as in France and Italy, even though the country's initial democratization experiment failed spectacularly, it had major positive effects down the road. When a second chance at democracy came a generation later, there was much to build on, and everything from political parties to national and local governments to civil-society organizations were reclaimed from the ashes. The Weimar experience helped political elites later on ensure that past mistakes were not repeated, with the lessons influencing the writing of constitutions, the structuring of welfare states and employer-employee relations, and political behavior overall. The interwar period and its aftermath proved to be not a detour but an important stage of Europe's long-term struggle to build stable liberal democracies.

IT GETS BETTER

What do such cases have to say about the Arab Spring? That the problems so evident in Egypt and other transitioning countries today are entirely normal and predictable, that they are primarily the fault of the old authoritarian regimes rather than new democratic actors, and that the demise of authoritarianism and the experimentation with democratic rule will almost certainly be seen in retrospect as major steps forward in these countries' political development, even if things get worse before they eventually get better.

Most countries that are stable liberal democracies today had a very difficult time getting there. Even the cases most often held up as exemplars of early or easy democratization, such as England and the United States, encountered far more problems than are remembered, with full-scale civil wars along the way. Just as those troubles did not mean democracy

was wrong or impossible for North America or western Europe, so the troubles of today's fledgling Arab democracies do not mean it is wrong or impossible for the Middle East.

Then and now, most of the problems new democracies faced were inherited. Democracy does not necessarily cause or exacerbate communal and social strife and frustration, but it does allow the distrust and bitterness built up under authoritarian regimes to surface, often with lamentable results. But nostalgia for authoritarian stability is precisely the wrong response to such troubles, since it is the pathologies inherent in authoritarianism that help cause the underlying problems in the first place.

History tells us that societies cannot overcome their problems unless and until they face them squarely. The toppling of a long-standing authoritarian regime is not the end of a process of democratization but the beginning of it. Even failed democratic experiments are usually critical positive stages in the political development of countries, eras in which they get started on rooting out the antidemocratic social, cultural, and economic legacies of the past. Too many observers today interpret problems and setbacks as signs that an eventual stable democratic outcome is not in the cards. But such violent and tragic events as the French Revolution, the collapse of interwar Italian and German democracy, and the American Civil War were not evidence that the countries in question could not create or sustain liberal democracies; they were crucial parts of the process by which those countries achieved just such an outcome.

The widespread pessimism about the fate of the Arab Spring is almost certainly misplaced. Of course, the Middle East has a unique mix of cultural, historical, and economic attributes. But so does every region, and there is little reason to expect the Arab world to be a permanent exception to the rules of political development. The year 2011 was the dawn of a

promising new era for the region, and it will be looked on down the road as a historical watershed, even though the rapids downstream will be turbulent. Conservative critics of democracy will be wrong this time, just as they were about France, Italy, Germany, and every other country that supposedly was better off under tyranny.

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The Mirage of the Arab Spring

Deal With the Region You Have, Not the Region You Want

Seth G. Jones

As popular demonstrations swept across the Arab world in 2011, many U.S. policymakers and analysts were hopeful that the movements would usher in a new era for the region. That May, President Barack Obama described the uprisings as "a historic opportunity" for the United States "to pursue the world as it should be." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton echoed these comments, expressing confidence that the transformations would allow Washington to advance "security, stability, peace, and democracy" in the Middle East. Not to be outdone, the Republican Party's 2012 platform

trumpeted "the historic nature of the events of the past two years -- the Arab Spring -- that have unleashed democratic movements leading to the overthrow of dictators who have been menaces to global security for decades." Some saw the changes as heralding a long-awaited end to the Middle East's immunity to previous waves of global democratization; others proclaimed that al Qaeda and other radicals had finally lost the war of ideas.

The initial results of the tumult were indeed inspiring. Broad-based uprisings removed Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi from power. Since the toppling of these dictators, all three countries have conducted elections that international observers deemed competitive and fair, and millions of people across the region can now freely express their political opinions.

The prospects for further democratization, however, have dimmed. Most countries in the Arab world have not jumped political tracks, and those that did begin to liberalize are now struggling to maintain order, lock in their gains, and continue moving forward. The region's economic growth has been sluggish -- which is particularly worrisome, since according to a 2012 Pew Research Center poll, majorities in several countries there (including Jordan and Tunisia) value a strong economy more than a democratic government. And even after all the changes, the region comprising the Middle East and North Africa remains the least free in the world, with Freedom House estimating that 72 percent of the countries and 85 percent of the people there still lack basic political rights and civil liberties.

In the wake of the uprisings, many local regimes remain weak and unable to establish law and order. Syria has descended into a bloody civil war along sectarian lines. Iraq and Yemen, already unstable beforehand, remain deeply fractured and

violent. Libya's fragile central government has failed to disarm the warlords and militias that control many of the country's rural areas. Even in Egypt, the poster child for regional political reform, the Muslim Brotherhood-led government has attempted to solidify its control and silence the media using tactics reminiscent of the Mubarak era. Meanwhile, as the riots that spread across the region in September illustrated, anti-American sentiment shows no signs of abating. Terrorism continues to be a major problem, too, with al Qaeda and its affiliates trying to fill the vacuums in Libya, Syria, and other unstable countries.

The demise of Middle Eastern authoritarianism may come eventually. But there is little reason to think that day is near, and even less reason to think that the United States can significantly increase its chances of happening. Any effort by Washington to bring democracy to the region will fail if local social and economic conditions are not ripe and if vested interests in the countries oppose political reforms. Indeed, outside powers such as the United States have historically had only a marginal impact, at best, on whether a country democratizes. Until another wave of local uprisings does succeed in transforming the region, U.S. policy should not be hamstrung by an overly narrow focus on spreading democracy. The United States and its allies need to protect their vital strategic interests in the region -- balancing against rogue states such as Iran, ensuring access to energy resources, and countering violent extremists. Achieving these goals will require working with some authoritarian governments and accepting the Arab world for what it is today.

WAVING OFF

In the 1970s and 1980s, what the political scientist Samuel Huntington called the "third wave" of global democratization led to breathtaking political changes in Latin America, parts

of Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and eventually Eastern Europe. Freedom was on the march almost everywhere -- except for the Middle East. The immunity of Arab regimes to democratization was so broad and seemingly so durable that it gave rise to a new literature, one seeking to explain not democratic change but authoritarian persistence. Some have argued that the Arab Spring has changed all this and that it is best understood as a delayed regional onset of the third wave or even the harbinger of a fourth. But that misreads events and offers undue optimism.

In Algeria, for example, the protest movement that began in December 2010 with the aim of overthrowing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and installing a democratic system has sputtered. The government has cracked down on dissenters and appeased others with symbolic reforms. Even though the May 2012 parliamentary elections were derided by much of the population as a sham and the long-entrenched military government declared an emphatic victory, few Algerians took to the streets in protest. Similarly, in Jordan, King Abdullah kept protesters at bay with modest concessions, such as dismissing government ministers and expanding popular subsidies. Regardless of these superficial changes, the Hashemite monarchy remains firmly in control, and Jordanian security forces continue to crush domestic resistance, restrict freedom of expression, and prevent peaceful assembly.

In Saudi Arabia, the monarchy has kept a firm grip on power and has used its might to prop up neighboring autocratic regimes. In February 2011, Riyadh ordered tanks into Bahrain to help put down a popular uprising that Saudi and Bahraini leaders portrayed as sectarian agitation. What the Saudis and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council really feared, however, was the protesters' demands that Bahrain become a constitutional monarchy. The Gulf monarchies, as uncomfortable with the Arab Spring as they were with Arab nationalism half a century earlier, have once

again taken up the mantle of counterrevolution. A telltale sign came in May 2011, when the GCC offered membership to the kingdoms of Jordan and Morocco, neither of which are located in the Gulf region. Coupled with the financing that the GCC provided to Egypt in order to gain leverage over its new government, these overtures demonstrated that the Arab monarchies intend to consolidate their power and spread their influence across the Middle East.

At the same time, the Arab countries that managed to topple their old regimes face great uncertainty. In Libya, for example, the July 2012 elections did indeed represent a remarkable achievement for a state still reeling from decades of dictatorial rule, especially given that fears of violence, fraud, or an Islamist landslide did not materialize. But storm clouds loom ahead. As in Iraq, the writing of a constitution in Libya will likely be hampered by divisions over the question of federal power between different parts of the country. And as the September killing of the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans in Benghazi demonstrated, the government is struggling to reestablish security and the rule of law. The bureaucracy is weak; well-armed militias control much of the countryside; and Salafi groups have attacked Sufi shrines across the country, digging up graves and destroying mosques and libraries. Human rights abuses continue, as thousands of prisoners taken during the struggle to oust Qaddafi remain in illegal detention facilities, where they face mistreatment, torture, and even extrajudicial killings. And tens of thousands of displaced people, many of whom were forced out of their homes, languish in refugee camps around the country.

Yemen is also a mess. Following several bloody crackdowns on the country's protest movement throughout 2011, President Ali Abdullah Saleh eventually agreed in November of that year to transfer power to his vice president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. But in the subsequent presidential

election, Hadi was the only candidate on the ballot. His weak government is now grappling with a Shiite rebellion in the north, a secessionist movement and an al Qaeda insurgency in the south, and powerful militias and tribes that control substantial swaths of territory. All signs indicate that violence will persist and the economy will remain in the doldrums.

Egypt recently held the first competitive presidential election in its history, but the country does not have an easy path to stability and prosperity. President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood has wrested substantial political and military control from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Like Mubarak before him, he has tried to vest himself with enormous power; he currently holds significant executive, legislative, and judicial authority, and he has attempted to silence the media. Yet the generals continue to exercise influence through the National Defense Council, and secular liberals are challenging Morsi's consolidation of power in the courts. And one of the strongest political challenges to the Brotherhood comes not from liberals but from al Nour, a Salafi party that supports strict implementation of sharia. Political instability and a difficult period of civil-military relations will continue to weigh heavily on the economy, which has been crippled by a lack of foreign investment, disruptions in manufacturing, and a decline in tourism.

Tunisia has emerged as one of the few success stories of the region's upheaval. It has evolved from an authoritarian state to an electoral democracy whose new leaders have supported moderation, civil liberties, and the rule of law. The press is vibrant, civil society has blossomed, and the leadership appears committed to tackling corruption. Although Tunisia faces some of the same problems as its neighbors, such as a weak state and a challenge from radical Salafists, at least for now, the country is moving in the right direction. Unfortunately, the futures of few other countries in the region

look as promising.

IT'S GOOD TO BE THE KING

Scholars have long puzzled over the hurdles to democracy in the Middle East, particularly given the rapid expansion of freedom elsewhere in the world. Classical modernization theory holds that democracy will follow when a society reaches a certain level of economic development. But even in the wealthiest Arab countries, democracy has not yet materialized. Another common but false assumption is that doing away with a dictatorship necessarily leads to freedom. Yet as Huntington and others have pointed out, when authoritarian regimes fall, they sometimes give way to other authoritarian regimes rather than to liberal ones. Despite the developments of the last two years, certain structural factors will continue to block the spread of democracy in the Middle East.

Some governments in the region, especially in the Gulf, derive the majority of their revenue from energy exports and foreign aid. Relying heavily on such income streams allows these regimes to avoid taxing their populations significantly, removing a central source of popular demand for political participation. The American colonists insisted on "no taxation without representation." Think of this as the converse principle: no representation without taxation.

Energy wealth also allows autocrats to fund their security forces lavishly and buy the loyalty of key domestic constituencies. In March 2011, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia blunted calls for reform by announcing a staggering $130 billion benefits package that improved wages and job opportunities for a population of less than 30 million. The benefits mostly went to the young and the poor, the groups that had been at the forefront of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. Riyadh's control of an official clerical establishment

proved similarly instrumental in delegitimizing protests, as the Saudi grand mufti -- the country's chief Sunni religious leader -- issued a fatwa against demonstrations and dissent.

The external environment, furthermore, will not be particularly helpful in spurring further political change. In the late 1980s, Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, facing grim economic problems at home, decided to curb Soviet support for communist regimes in Eastern Europe -- a move that sounded the death knell of authoritarianism there. The former Soviet satellite states promptly turned to Western Europe and the United States, which supported their political liberalization and welcomed the region into democratic institutions such as the European Union and NATO. But today, the Saudi regime -- the richest and strongest authoritarian power in the region -- is trying to fight reforms and has shown that it is more than willing to dispense cash to that end. And so even though many Arab autocrats now face unprecedented unrest at home, they still possess the ample financial resources that have kept their regimes afloat for so long.

The region's monarchies, finally, have been particularly adept at resisting democratic change. Kingdoms such as Jordan, Morocco, and Oman, for example, do not enjoy large per capita oil revenues, but their traditional regimes have nonetheless managed to remain in power while ceding some control to elected parliaments. Where the ruler retains a special bond with the people, either by claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad (as in Morocco) or by serving as a unifying force for different ethnic groups in the country (as in Jordan), protesters have been more likely to accept legislative change and have not demanded a wholesale abandonment of the monarchy.

In January 2011, for example, Jordanian protesters began to complain about corruption, rising prices, rampant poverty,

and high unemployment. In response, King Abdullah replaced his prime minister and formed two commissions to study possible electoral reforms and constitutional amendments. In September, the king approved amendments to create a more independent judiciary and establish a constitutional court and an independent electoral commission to oversee the next municipal and parliamentary elections. There have been occasional violent demonstrations, such as in late 2012, when protesters complained about rising gas prices. But so far, the government's limited concessions have managed to head off most instability, leaving Abdullah in control.

HURRY UP AND WAIT

Washington should not base its policy toward the greater Middle East on the assumption that the region is democratizing quickly or sustainably. The United States and other Western countries should encourage liberal reforms, support civil society, and provide technical assistance in improving countries' constitutions and financial systems. But the perceived promise of the Arab uprisings should not cause the United States to overlook its main strategic priorities in the region. Like it or not, the United States counts among its allies a number of authoritarian Arab countries, and they are essential partners in protecting its interests. The normative hope that liberal democracy may flourish in the future must be balanced by the need to work with governments and societies as they exist today.

A central goal remains counterbalancing Iran -- not only preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapons but also checking its long-term regional ambitions. Iran views the United States as its main ideological and geopolitical enemy, and it is seeking to become the preeminent power in the Middle East and to promote its revolutionary ideology. Tehran has lent support to a number of U.S. adversaries and organizations that challenge U.S. interests, including Shiite

groups in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Palestinian terrorist groups, Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and the Venezuelan government under Hugo Chávez. Even though many of the countries that the United States will rely on to help counter Iran, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, are not democratic, their cooperation is too important for Washington to forsake.

Another crucial goal is maintaining the free flow of energy resources at reasonable prices. The United States imports about 23 percent of its crude oil and related products from the Arab world, particularly from Saudi Arabia (1.2 million barrels per day in August 2012), Iraq (550,000 barrels), Algeria (303,000 barrels), and Kuwait (301,000 barrels). Several of these countries are -- not coincidentally given their immense oil wealth -- undemocratic. This means that for the foreseeable future, the United States must continue to work with authoritarian states to preserve its energy security.

Finally, the United States needs to work with nondemocratic countries on fighting terrorism. Although al Qaeda has been weakened along the Afghan-Pakistani border, it has attempted to compensate for this by expanding its influence elsewhere and establishing relationships with local Sunni groups. In Yemen, for example, the local al Qaeda affiliate has exploited the weakness of the government and established a foothold in several provinces along the Gulf of Aden, triggering alarm in Saudi Arabia. With U.S. troops gone, al Qaeda in Iraq increased its attacks to nearly 30 per month in 2012, a 50 percent jump from the previous two years and a major cause of concern in Jordan. Militants from Iraq have also crept across the border into Syria, where they have orchestrated dozens of car bomb and suicide attacks against the Assad regime.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has dispatched fighters into Mali, Tunisia, and other countries, hoping to take advantage

of the political vacuums in North Africa. The al Qaeda affiliate al Shabab retains a foothold in parts of southern Somalia. And al Qaeda has fostered ties with other groups in the region, including Boko Haram in Nigeria, Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, and a jihadist network in Egypt led by Muhammad Jamal Abu Ahmad. Authoritarian governments such as those in Jordan and Saudi Arabia have been important allies in the fight against radical Islamist terrorism in the region, and keeping such cooperation intact is imperative.

In fact, the cold reality is that some democratic governments in the Arab world would almost certainly be more hostile to the United States than their authoritarian predecessors, because they would be more responsive to the populations of their countries, which are largely anti-American. According to a 2012 Pew Research poll, the United States' image in several countries in the Muslim world has deteriorated sharply over the past several years. Before the Arab uprisings, for example, 27 percent of Egyptians and 25 percent of Jordanians polled had favorable attitudes toward the United States. By 2012, those numbers had dropped to 19 percent and 12 percent, respectively. The September 2012 anti-American demonstrations in the region, which spread from Egypt and Libya throughout the Middle East, provided yet another reminder that anti-American and anti-Western sentiments still exist in the Muslim world.

The uprisings of the last two years have represented a significant challenge to authoritarian rule in the Arab world. But structural conditions appear to be preventing broader political liberalization in the region, and war, corruption, and economic stagnation could undermine further progress. Although the United States can take some steps to support democratization in the long run, it cannot force change. Middle Eastern autocrats may eventually fall, and the spread of liberal democracy would be welcomed by most Americans, even if it would carry certain risks. Yet until such changes

occur because of the labor of Arabs themselves, U.S. policy toward the Middle East should focus on what is attainable. As former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld might put it, Washington should conduct its foreign policy with the Arab world it has, not the Arab world it might want or wish to have at a later time.

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Tunisia's Post-Revolution Blues

Stagnation and Stalemate Where the Arab Spring Began

Aaron Y. Zelin

COURTESY REUTERS

At least Tunisia is not as bad as Egypt -- that is the hardly comforting good news coming out of the country where the Arab Spring began, more than two years ago. The bad news is that Tunisia has come up far short of the lofty expectations set by Tunisians and outsiders in January 2011, when protests finally forced President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali from office. Among the Middle East's post-revolutionary governments,

Tunisia still has the best chance of turning into a consolidated democracy, but barriers old and new are making the task far more difficult.

As I discovered during a recent research trip, Tunisians are deeply worried about their country's sluggish economy, worsening security situation, and never-ending political stalemate. The protests that began the revolution centered on the lack of job opportunities, and Tunisians at all levels of society are still demanding economic improvement. Now, however, they are increasingly fearful for their own safety, the assassination of the popular left-leaning and secular politician Chokri Belaid being just the latest cause for concern, and they are growing disillusioned with the country's acute political polarization. Together, the lack of progress on these fronts has left once hopeful observers worrying that if Tunisia, a small, educated, and religiously and ethnically homogenous country, is having so much trouble with its transition, then perhaps every other Arab Spring country is doomed, too.

On the economic front, Moody's and the S&P have both downgraded their assessments of Tunisia's economy in recent weeks; the country's bond rating is now officially at junk status. Tourism, once a main source of income, has not rebounded since the revolution; I was traveling in the off-season, but even so, I was struck by how few European tourists there were in Tunis and Sousse. The age-old economic gap between the coastal regions and the interior continues to grow, a divide that Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, the Islamist group believed to be behind the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis last September, is exploiting through its own social welfare programs.

Moreover, according to one U.S. diplomat I spoke with, Tunisia's business climate is far from welcoming. The government's protectionist rules against franchises have

discouraged foreign companies, including American ones, from entering the Tunisian market, reducing the prospects for employment even further. A loan from the International Monetary Fund, currently under negotiation, would help alleviate some of the pain and start Tunisia down the path of economic reform. But the IMF has held back, announcing in February, "Once the political situation is clarified, we'll assess how best to help Tunisia."

Progress has also been hampered by the lack of any major economic legislation. The Constituent Assembly, the legislature in charge of creating a new constitution, and Ennahda, the Islamist party that leads the assembly, seem to be plodding along. For months, the government has been discussing long-overdue structural reforms, such as fixing the country's outdated investment and labor codes, but so far there is no legislation to show for it. An IMF reform package may help someday, but things surely would be better had the government not waited 18 months to start the process.

One challenge the Tunisian state will have to deal with is that the number of university-educated graduates exceeds the number of available jobs. When I spoke with a former official in the Ben Ali regime, he explained that the problem dates back to the proliferation of universities during the 1980s. Every year, 70,000 students graduated from college, competing for only 30,000 positions. Over time, frustration among educated yet unemployed young people built up, culminating in the December 2010 protests. That frustration has not disappeared, with youth unemployment among college graduates, according to the National Institute of Statistics, at over 33 percent.

The security situation in Tunisia has also deteriorated. I landed in Tunis a week after Belaid's assassination -- the first high-profile killing in the country's history -- so an atmosphere of insecurity still permeated the air. In a sense, the murder

exemplified the insecurity that Tunisians have faced since the revolution.

Part of the problem is that the government has failed to reform its security service. The Ministry of Interior, which houses the police and national guard, now consists of three factions: one loyal to Ben Ali, one loyal to Ennahda, and one loyal to no one. The competing interests have left the ministry in disarray, and it has failed to enforce security as a result. Radwan Masmoudi, the president of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy in Tunis, told me that the ministry had to be completely rebuilt, within the confines of respecting human rights and the rule of law. "Security is the first condition for real and sustained economic and political progress," he said, "especially in a country where over 400,000 people work in the tourism industry."

Even as it has done little to improve security, the Ministry of Interior has also been accused of victimizing innocent civilians. Left-of-center Tunisians told me that when Islamist demonstrations break out, the police protect the protesters, whereas when secularists or liberals hold protests, the police attack them with tear gas. Members of Ansar al-Sharia, for their part, complained to me that employees of the Ministry of Interior are breaking into their homes and mosques, destroying possessions and making arbitrary arrests.

Tunisia's politicians have done little to address these issues, partially because they are still busy drafting a constitution, which was originally supposed to be finished in October 2012. Elections should be held six months after the constitution is completed. When they are, security will be a major campaign issue, according to Sonia Karma, a senior leader with the main secular opposition party, Nida Tunis, which includes some former regime officials. But it is hard to see how the law-and-order approach will provide much of an advantage come campaign season, since the movement is still very

coastal, urban, and elite.

Regardless, if the current political climate is any guide, the campaign will feature ample mudslinging. Nida Tunis and Ennahda are the two biggest parties, and both have used toxic language to denigrate each other, with Nida Tunis calling the Islamists "rats" and Ennahda labeling its secular opponents "snakes." In this zero-sum game, each side believes that it can eliminate the other. As one liberal activist, unaffiliated with any political party, put it to me, political progress will occur only when each faction accepts that the others are not going away. "Dialogue and respect is the only approach," he said.

As Tunisia sorts out its politics, Ennahda is also struggling to figure out what type of party it will become. Last February, in a move that revealed the divide between Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali and the rest of Ennahda, Jebali resigned after the party rejected his attempt to install a technocratic government as a way of resolving the political impasse. Jebali's son-in-law, Mahmoud Kammoun, told me that Ennahda will have to follow the path that Turkey's Justice and Development Party, the AKP, has taken: embracing Islamism but respecting democratic principles. Veering any further to the right, he said, would be catastrophic for Tunisia, since it could lead to a government that curtailed freedom of expression and the rights of women and minorities.

The possibility of such a rightward drift stokes fears among Tunisia's left. But Ennahda has its own legitimate fears. Suppressed during the Ben Ali era, the party sees Nida Tunis as attempting to revive the old regime and once again suppress the Islamists. Both parties have valid concerns, and the deep differences between them represent one reason that the constitution has yet to be completed and the next election has yet to be scheduled.

What unites the Tunisian politicians and activists I spoke to across the political spectrum is concern about their country's prospects if the parties can't agree on a constitution. As both Masmoudi and Kammoun warned, if the democratic project fails, the only solution left for people to turn to would be the sharia option. In other words, political dysfunction could create more room for puritanical groups, such as Ansar al-Sharia, that operate outside the political process. Over the last two years, Ansar al-Sharia has grown rapidly thanks to its strategy of demonstrating, albeit on a limited scale, that unlike Tunisia's politicians, it can actually provide people with food, medicine, and security.

According to a Pew poll released last summer, only 23 percent of Tunisians want their country's laws to strictly follow the Koran, and the shared fear of sharia among the rest of the population could well compel a political compromise. In that case, Tunisia could move on to the next phase of its transition, conducting another election and attempting to solve its economic crisis. Otherwise, the current political impasse and general feelings of instability could become the new normal.

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Tunisia’s Lessons for the Middle East

Why the First Arab Spring Transition Worked Best

Ibrahim Sharqieh

ZOUBEIR SOUISSI / COURTESY REUTERS

Rachid al-Ghannouchi, leader of the Islamist Ennahda movement, speaks during a news conference in Tunis, August 15, 2013.

The sudden collapse in 2011 of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s regime in Tunisia, one of the most robust security states in the Arab world, inspired protests from Egypt to Yemen. Some of these movements managed to topple entrenched autocratic rulers; others did not. Although Tunisia has its problems, it is safe to say that the country is faring better today than most of its fellow Arab Spring nations. As

interviews with senior government officials, heads of political parties, representatives of civil society organizations, academics and opinion leaders, and former political prisoners make clear, the Tunisian approach has distinguished itself in two areas: the sound management of its transition process and its rational, systematic approach. As countries throughout the region struggle to establish new social contracts, they should keep in mind Tunisia's lessons.

The way Tunisia handled its most recent political crisis is characteristic: On July 25, a Salafi extremist assassinated Mohamed al-Brahmi, a member of the National Constituent Assembly (the interim parliament). In response, over 50 members withdrew from the assembly, demanding the dissolution of the government and the formation of a new, technocratic government to lead the country the rest of the way through the transition. Rather than take up arms, the opposition parties protested peacefully. Meanwhile, the government held intensive talks with all parties to try to end the standoff. To date, it has offered substantial concessions -- including forming a national unity government and suspending sessions of the Constituent Assembly, which had been an opposition demand. Unlike in Egypt, there was no foreign mediation. Although a final agreement on a technocratic government has yet to be reached, all parties continue to talk and explore solutions.

That is a testament to the inclusive approach most Tunisians have taken to the transition from day one. Like in Egypt, the mainstream Islamists were poised to take power after the leader was pushed out. Just as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood made a strong showing in the first post-Mubarak vote, Tunisia's Ennahda Party won 41 percent of the seats in the Constituent Assembly in the first post–Ben Ali vote. Rather than strong-arm the other parties, Ennahda politicians joined in a troika coalition with the Ettakatol Party and the Congress for the Republic, both center-left groups. Ennahda

also decided to support the nomination of the secularist Moncef Marzouki for the presidency. Marzouki, a human rights activist and detainee under Ben Ali, headed the Congress for the Republic, which had received only 13.4 percent of the Assembly seats. Despite the three parties' ideological differences, the coalition has held together for almost two years now; for his part, Marzouki has managed to stay atop the coalition but has not established himself as an especially powerful leader on the national level, particularly amid political crises.

AND JUSTICE FOR MOST

Tunisia's transitional government has made laudable progress toward a comprehensive, well-reasoned transitional justice law. Of the 12 members of the independent committee charged with drafting the law, only two represent the Ministry of Justice; the other ten come from various civil society groups. Those members gauge popular opinion by meeting with people throughout the country and asking the victims of the Ben Ali dictatorship what they want and expect from the transitional justice process. The committee has also consulted with organizations specializing in transitions and transitional justice and has included them among its ten civil society members. The Al-Kawakibi Democracy Transition Center and the Tunisia Network for Transitional Justice, both represented in the committee, have played key roles.

Tunisia has chosen a middle path for dealing with the former regime elements. It has avoided enacting anything resembling Libya's sweeping Political Isolation Law, which penalized most anyone who held public office between 1969 and 2011. Tunisia also opted for something more rigorous than did Yemen, where the immunity law that accompanied the country's Gulf-brokered settlement short-circuited any attempt at transitional justice and prevented prosecutions for past violations. Not one person in Yemen has been held

accountable for past crimes, and the former regime has continued to govern without even minimal party reform. Tunisia’s approach, on the other hand, has been termed tahseen al-thawra (fortifying the revolution). Some of the most senior former officials will be banned from public office for five years. But those who have not been tried or convicted will be permitted to participate in politics -- allowing, for example, the Habib Bourguiba-era official Beji Caid Essebsi to lead the Nidaa Tounes Party. (Essebsi has also said he plans to run in the next presidential election.) Tunisians have emphasized a targeted process of transitional justice, prosecuting on an individual basis; otherwise, they are resolute that only the ballot box should exclude these figures from public life.

On institutional reform, meanwhile, the Constituent Assembly has adopted the approach of gharbala (sifting) rather than the kind of full-scale tatheer (purge) demanded in Libya. In reforming the judiciary, the priority has been on removing judges linked by hard evidence to corruption or misconduct. The security services, meanwhile, will be subject to oversight from new structures such as the National Authority for the Prevention of Torture, which will be in charge of monitoring and inspecting the country’s prisons. It will also have the authority to enter any jail and interview its prisoners. In addition, although the government faces charges of restricting the media, the Constituent Assembly has at least formed special committees to inspect and reform the state media, complicit for so long in glorifying the former regime, and the historically corrupt administrative apparatus.

All of the efforts to grapple with the legacy of the old regime have been complemented by parallel national dialogues, one put forward by the country’s presidency and one by the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT). The dialogues aim to forge agreement on key challenges facing the country, including the nature of the state, elections, and basic

elements of the constitution. Together, the two tracks include more than 60 political parties and 50 civil society organizations. They have already led to agreements on a number of key points: a firm rejection of violence; the economy as a government priority; a road map for the transition; consensus on major issues like a civil state and a constitutional system; the independence of the judiciary; freedom of the press; and freedom of assembly. Further, the national dialogue formed a committee of 17 political parties and four civil society organizations to implement all agreements.

THE SOURCES OF TUNISIAN CONDUCT

There are several cultural and religious factors that have worked in Tunisia's favor throughout the transition. In conversation, Tunisians frequently emphasize that most Tunisians reject radicalism and violence. Some, including Said Ferjani, an Ennahda politician, attribute that to the prevalence of the moderate Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence, which has historically rejected extremism (a reported 98 percent of Tunisians adhere to Malikism). Others point to the rule of Tunisian President Bourguiba, from 1957 to 1987, and the cultural legacy of his centralizing and modernizing project. Tunisia also lacks the sharp ethnic, tribal, or sectarian-religious delineations that have proven so divisive elsewhere.

Structural factors, however, do not fully explain Tunisia's course. One important issue is the outlook of the Ennahda Party, which differs dramatically from that of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Brotherhood leaders were subjected to decades of systematic repression and radicalization within Egypt; their political agenda was largely shaped in regime prisons. For example, Mohamed Badie, the supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, was jailed from 1965 to 1974 under Egyptian Presidents Gamal Abdul Nasser and Anwar Sadat. (And he

has now been imprisoned again.) Ennahda leaders, on the other hand, spent the Ben Ali years in exile. From 1991 to 2011, the Ennahda leader Rached al-Ghannouchi resided in London, as did many of the group's other top figures. The experience had a modernizing influence on Ennahda's political thought, pushing it embrace and articulate a more inclusive and conciliatory model. It is also worth noting the comparative weight of Egypt's Salafis, which won 28 percent of the country's 2011 parliamentary vote and helped to polarize the country's political debate and drag the Egyptian Brotherhood further to the right.

Tunisia also enjoys, contra Egypt, a professional, noninterventionist army with a commitment to republicanism. Egypt's army has historically stood apart from the government, wielding political power in its own right. It even has its own set of international allies: the U.S.-Egyptian military-to-military relationship occasionally overshadows bilateral diplomatic relations. Tunisia's army, on the other hand, was decisive in Ben Ali's ouster and the subsequent transition in part because of its relative absence from Tunisian politics.

Tunisia has also benefited from having an intact Constituent Assembly for most of its transition, providing a broadly legitimate platform for debate. (The lower house of Egypt's parliament was dissolved by court order, leaving only the weaker upper house.) Although Tunisia's Constituent Assembly was also recently suspended, it is expected to return soon; most of the efforts to mediate the country's political crisis, which seem close to a resolution, have emphasized the resumption of the assembly's work. In addition, civil society has played a leading role in national dialogue and mediation.

THE TUNISIAN MODEL

Of course, this is not to say that the Tunisian transition does not face challenges, among them some continued popular protest and the desperate state of the economy. Transitions need substantial budgets; reconciliation is typically based in part on compensation for victims of the old regime -- former prisoners, the families of the disappeared, and so on. Tunisia is resource poor, and its tourism industry has been hit hard by the revolution and its aftermath. It is not unusual to visit tourist destinations around the country and find them entirely deserted these days.

Tunisia also faces a difficult challenge to state authority and the rule of law: the Committees for the Protection of the Revolution (CPRs). These committees, which are composed of former revolutionaries, have taken it upon themselves to defend the revolution and agitate for old-regime elements to be held accountable. Although the transition is moving ahead, committee members fear the rise of a revanchist counterrevolution. In at least one instance, a CPR has been accused of killing an opposition politician, Lutfi Naqeq of the Nidaa Tounes Party. CPRs have also been suspected of attacking UGTT in Tunis. Some opposition groups believe that the CPRs are the military wing of the Ennahda Party. In reality, they are not, although they do include some party members. The challenge of revolutionary demobilization is one that faces most revolutions, and Tunisia is no exception. Still, the best way to deal with these committees has become a divisive topic. Ennahda has argued that any political decision to dissolve the committees will undermine the transition and that, instead, committees linked to violence should be dissolved through the Tunisian courts. Others, though, argue that the license for vigilantism is intolerable and that protecting the revolution is the exclusive responsibility of the state.

Tunisia also faces at least one kind of polarization that is more extreme than in other Arab cases: the vast (and

growing) divide between Tunisia's secularist liberals and its ultraconservative Salafi Islamists. Tunisian secularism is vibrant and unparalleled in the Arab world; under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, Tunisia was the only Arab country to ban the hijab in state institutions. Its Salafi jihadists, meanwhile, demand a purely religious state and have shown their willingness to attack cultural activities they deem un-Islamic. Tunisia is a sharp contrast with Egypt, for example, where there was basic consensus on the establishment of Islam as the state religion; in Tunisia, the sheer distance between these two cultural extremes makes the chance that they will coalesce around one vision for the state rather slim. Moreover, Salafis, who were imprisoned or underground before the revolution, have been growing in strength. Jailed Salafi leaders -- including Abu Ayadh, the leader of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia -- were released as part of the country's post-revolution amnesty and have since grown in influence. The Salafi group Ansar al-Sharia's annual conference in 2012 attracted roughly 5,000 attendees; an estimated 50,000 are expected to attend the 2013 conference in the city of Kairouan. The huge gap between liberals and Salafis has left the moderate Ennahda Party, almost by default, to occupy the Tunisian middle. The upshot is that one can witness Ennahda figures being tarred -- often simultaneously -- as closet fundamentalists by liberals and as infidels and tyrants by Salafis.

Of course, the government has means for dealing with each of these problems. The ultimate solution for Tunisia's economic difficulties is progress on its political transition; as normalcy is restored, tourism can be expected to bounce back. In the meantime, however, the international community should financially support the transition, recognizing that they are not just investing in Tunisia but in a model for successful transitions that can be exported to the entire Arab region.

On the controversy over the CPRs, both sides have valid

points and concerns. Here, the emphasis should be on bolstering and promoting the rule of law. CPRs should not all be treated as one; the choice should not be to either keep them all or dissolve them by political decree. Rather, any individual CPR that breaks the law or behaves in violation of its registered and declared goals should be immediately disbanded within the framework of the Tunisian judicial system.

Socioeconomic development can also help mitigate pockets of domestic radicalism. There is a reason why the poorest neighborhood of Tunis, Tadamon, witnessed violence when this year's Ansar al-Sharia conference was canceled. Second, Tunisia can also rely on its legacy of Maliki jurisprudence. The Ez-Zitouna Mosque in Tunis is one of the world's most important centers of Maliki thought. The mosque's Maliki scholars have worked hard to counter ultraconservative Wahhabi thought by putting forward an Islam based in knowledge and reason. They thus seem primed to repel a new surge in radicalism and help forge societal consensus.

Because of the challenges ahead, Tunisians seem to have little confidence in their transition. In conversation, they constantly ask how it compares to those in other countries. But the Tunisians really are a model for the Arab world's transitioning states. After all, they are not just building a new set of state institutions; they are forging a culture of accountability and the rule of law. This is how Tunisia can accommodate the political participation of pre-revolutionary figures such as Essebsi and Kamel Morjane, around whom Tunisia is changing for the better. Although Tunisia benefits from some unique characteristics, other Arab countries should seek to emulate its homegrown national dialogue, its political coalition-building, and its bottom-up approach to reform, best exemplified by the drafting of its transitional justice law. For Tunisia, this approach of steady, inclusive, and rule-based state-building is allowing for broad reconciliation and a real

evolution in Tunisian society. As for the rest of the Arab world, Tunisia may well show it the way forward.

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The Tunisia Model

Did Tunis Win the Arab Spring?

Brian Klaas and Marcel Dirsus

ANIS MILI / COURTESY REUTERS

A supporter of the Nida Tounes secular party movement waves a Tunisian flag in Tunis, October 21, 2014.

Nearly four years ago, Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled for his life when the first of the Arab Spring uprisings forced him from power. Most of his ministers were close on his heels, scurrying to save themselves in exile. Many of those who did not flee went into hiding or jail.

Several months later, Tunisia held its first competitive multi-party elections. In that vote, however, Tunisians did not have complete freedom of choice; all the top-level figures associated with Ben Ali's toppled regime were banned from

running—a short-term measure that was designed to protect the fragile new democracy from slipping back toward dictatorship.

On October 26, Tunisians will finally have a real and unrestricted choice at the polls. Several of the remnants of the Ben Ali system—former officials who were not imprisoned and have now come out of hiding—are on the ballot in the parliamentary election. And three former top-level Ben Ali-era ministers will compete in presidential elections in late-November: Kemal Morjane, Mondher Znaidi, and Abderrahim Zouari. The sitting government gave them permission to run in the spirit of national reconciliation and inclusivity.

That decision might seem surprising. After all, in addition to keeping the state running, new democratic politicians must decide how to cope with the cobwebs of authoritarianism. They are inevitably eager to ensure not only that the dictator is removed, but also that members of the dictator's regime are purged. But more often than not, purges are a serious mistake. As John Stuart Mill argued a century and a half ago, a free marketplace of ideas is necessary to allow citizens to separate good ideas from bad ones. As counterintuitive as it may seem, then, the inclusion in the upcoming election of Ben Ali-era politicians—men who actively supported a ruthless dictatorship—is one of the most promising steps that Tunisia has taken to preserve its democracy so far.

If Ben Ali's former ministers had been banned, they could have become a source of volatility—as symbols of political martyrdom to their followers. Banned candidates may also launch coups and civil wars, taking power with bullets after being excluded from the ballot box. (Côte d'Ivoire is a tragic and clear example.) By contrast, in Tunisia, three former Ben Ali ministers are going to freely stand as candidates—and lose, partly because they will split the vote and partly because most Tunisians do not want someone so closely affiliated with

Ben Ali to return to power. And that will be a much more effective (and less destabilizing) way to cope with the old guard.

Purges that go too far are a grave risk to fragile democracies. Tunisians do not need to look far to see why. Just to Tunisia's east, militants are tearing apart Libya in a series of feuds that were intensified by Libya's Political Isolation Law, an attempt to rid the country of officials stained by their affiliation with deposed dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi. The problem, it turns out, is that any Libyan who worked in government in any capacity since 1969 is tainted by an affiliation with Gaddafi. As a result, purging those affiliated with his rule meant getting rid of nearly everyone who knew how to run the country.

Libya made enormous mistakes with its transitional purge, but those mistakes are nothing compared to the United States' de-Baathification debacle in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The American-led authority in Iraq barred an estimated 100,000 members of Saddam's party—including teachers, doctors, and professors—from participation in the country's political life, simply because they were once employed by the authoritarian government. And so a generation of institutional know-how was wiped out with the stroke of L. Paul Bremer's pen. That policy—combined with the decision to disband Iraq's military and send men with guns home without a paycheck—goes a long way toward explaining why Iraq spiraled out of control.

With few exceptions, Tunisia has avoided similar mistakes. Instead, the country has designed its transition to build consensus rather than exploit divisions, on constructive dialogue rather than protracted standoffs, and on inclusion rather than exclusion. For one, none of the major institutional organs of Ben Ali's state—including the military—was excised or disbanded. Instead, each was reformed and molded to

respond to Tunisia’s new and democratically elected government.

That same restraint stopped Tunisia from making the mistake of blindly purging politicians and bureaucrats with considerable expertise. In 2011, a commission led by the respected jurist Yadh Ben Achour ruled that ministerial-level politicians under Ben Ali’s regime should be disqualified from the country’s first democratic elections, but not from future participation in public life or politics. This decision coincided with the disbanding of Ben Ali’s ruling RCD party, but did not prohibit former members of the party from contesting future elections.

The commission went too far in only one respect, namely, its ruling to disqualify the so-called Mounachidines, a list of people who had publicly signed a letter prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring that called for Ben Ali to run for reelection. Some of the people on the list were genuine supporters of the dictatorship; others simply signed their names because they feared the consequences of being absent from it. If, for example, a university president did not demonstrate his or her support for the regime publicly, he or she could reasonably expect to be replaced (or worse). The difference between genuine support and support out of fear is a critical one, and successful transitions must recognize it. In 2011, this overzealousness had limited effects because the Revolution had just occurred and public opinion overwhelming backed the decision; repeating the mistake this year, however, could have been disastrous.

In short, there have been bumps along the way—and there are several serious potential political roadblocks that lurk ahead—but, so far, Tunisia is paving a much smoother road to democracy than its collapsing Arab Spring counterparts. And it deserves all the more credit for its response, given that this was the first time the country had ever thrown off the

shackles of a longstanding and brutal dictatorship in order to build a fledgling democracy.

This month's elections are thus both a celebration of Tunisia's success and a crucial test. Throughout 2013, hardline Islamists (including conservative members of Tunisia's big-tent Islamist party, Ennahda, and their further-right counterparts, the Wafa Movement) proposed to renew the directive that disqualified the Mounachidine and banned from standing for election anyone who had served in Ben Ali's government. When it came to a vote in May, though, the legislation was rejected—even with the Mounachidine provision stripped from the final proposal.

Polls suggest that the Islamist coalition, Ennahda, is most likely to win the parliamentary vote, but that the presidency will most likely be captured by the secular 87-year-old Beji Caid Essebsi, a former minister of foreign affairs for Ben Ali's predecessor who also served as the interim prime minister of Tunisia after Ben Ali fled the country in early 2011. Essebsi does have some ties to Ben Ali (he served as the president of the Chamber of Deputies for a year in the early 1990s), but he is not considered a close ally of the deposed strongman. His age may prove to be an issue, but he is a competent leader who is neither a staunch defender of Ben Ali nor a zealous secularist unwilling to compromise with the country's moderate Islamists. It would have been a shame, in other words, to disqualify him.

Tunisia still faces tremendous challenges, including spillover violence from Libya, terrorism from Ansar al-Sharia, and the threat of destabilizing post-election disputes. And, for the first time since 2011, more than half of all Tunisians said in a recent poll that they would prefer a stable, prosperous, authoritarian government over an unstable, insecure democracy, reflecting concerns regarding the country's ongoing economic woes. But Tunisia is nonetheless the last

Arab Spring democracy still standing. Other transitioning regimes in the Middle East and the world should take note: Democracy is not about exclusion, but about giving people a genuine choice—even, or especially, when it’s an uncomfortable one.

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Democracy by Necessity

Tunisians Go to the Polls

Marina Ottaway

ZOUBEIR SOUISSI / COURTESY REUTERS

Supporters of Nidaa Tounes wave flags in Tunis, December 21, 2014.

After three years of battles in the streets, in the National Constituent Assembly, and at the ballot box, Tunisia has officially completed its formal transition to democracy—to the acclaim of observers gratified that the Arab Spring kept its promise in at least one country. What is emerging at the end of the process, however, is not a government that is rooted in the revolution and likely to forge ahead with bold reforms, but an uneasy amalgam of old-regime and Islamist politicians, with a few leftist parties and trade unions thrown in for good measure. In other words, the 2011 uprising did not give rise to new political parties or movements. And the young people

who played an important part in the protests feel sidelined, at least if their low turnout at the polls is any indication. Nevertheless, this is probably as successful a transition as it was realistic to expect.

NO WINNERS AND NO LOSERS

The recent parliamentary and presidential elections did not give a clear victory to either the Islamist Ennahda Party or to Nida Tounes, the broad coalition party that was cobbled together for the sole purpose of defeating Ennahda. Nida Tounes' founder, Beji Caid Essebsi, won the presidential elections with 55.6 percent of the vote; his party won 37 percent of the parliamentary vote and control of 89 of 217 parliamentary seats. But this is not enough to marginalize Ennahda, as many in Nida Tounes would like to do. Ennahda obtained 27 percent of the parliamentary vote and 69 seats, and it will be impossible for Nida Tounes to exclude it from the governing coalition if it wants to create a cabinet backed by a stable majority. Negotiations to form the new government have not yet started, but a preview of the compromises that are likely to be struck has already been offered by the parliament. Reflecting the necessity for power sharing, Nida Tounes and Ennahda agreed that Mohammed Ennaceur of Nida Tounes would become speaker and Abdelfattah Mourou of Ennahda would become deputy speaker.

The outcome of the presidential election also stops short of being a full triumph for Nida Tounes and Essebsi. Outgoing President Moncef Marzouki received 44.3 percent of the vote, a particularly significant result because he is personally unpopular and has a reputation for erratic behavior. His party, the Congress for the Republic, was virtually obliterated in the latest parliamentary elections, going from 29 seats in 2011 to a mere four.

Indeed, in both parliamentary and presidential elections, Tunisians voted as much against a party or candidate as for one. Nida Tounes ran as an alternative to Ennahda, rather than on a clear program or identity of its own. Its main message was that it is the only viable alternative to Ennahda. And most of the voters who chose Marzouki did so in an attempt to deny Essebsi a victory, not because they really wanted Marzouki in power for a second term.

The inconclusive election results will force the parties to work together, which is the best guarantee that Tunisia will continue to function democratically. It is not a guarantee, however, that the government will be able to accomplish much in the way of needed reforms. Tunisia's political spectrum is truly pluralistic, with significant political forces, including the Islamists, the old regime politicians, and the left, that are too well-rooted in the society to be able to eliminate each other. Under the circumstances, democracy is more a necessity than a free choice. And so Nida Tounes, which argued during the election campaign that Ennahda had to be stopped because it would take Tunisia back into the Dark Ages, will have to govern with it. Nida Tounes officials vehemently deny that they will form an alliance with the Islamist party, but they admit that there will be cooperation, including giving Ennahda some ministerial posts. Ennahda, which was forced to relinquish control of the government in favor of a technocratic cabinet in March 2013 and feared complete exclusion if Nida Tounes won the elections, will remain an indispensable player.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

The emerging democratic Tunisia does not represent a revolutionary break with the past. There are hardly any new faces at the top of Tunisian politics. In fact, many are old men who have been in politics for decades. Essebsi, the newly elected president, is 88 and occupied a number of important

positions during the Habib Bourguiba presidency (1959-87). Rachid Ghannouchi, the founder of Ennahda and now its chairman, is 73. The speaker of the parliament, Ennaceur, is 80 and also held cabinet positions under Bourguiba. One of the parliament's deputy speakers, Mourou of Ennahda, is also a political veteran but, by comparison, young at 66.

Although old faces abound, Tunisia is not experiencing the restoration of the old regime. What is emerging instead is a new coalition of "Bourguibists" or "Destourians," that is politicians that trace more or less accurately their political experience back to the Bourguiba period, Islamists, or the left. Essebsi has successfully created a myth of Bourguiba as an enlightened, democratic leader, and service in his presidency has become a badge of democracy. In reality, Bourguiba ruled quite autocratically for almost three decades. Having served under President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Bourguiba's successor who was forced from power in 2011, does not confirm legitimacy and few openly tout that connection.

Ennahda is still dominated largely by the leaders that launched the organization in 1981, including Ghannouchi and Mourou. Many in that generation were imprisoned for long periods or forced into exile, but emerged again at the forefront of the movement in 2011. There are younger members in the leadership, as well as women, but the imprint of the old generation is deep, particularly that of Ghannouchi, who has influence with both the more moderate and the more radical wings of the organization.

The left, represented both by the labor unions federation (UGTT) and the Popular Front, is also an old component of Tunisian politics which are acquired a new role. The Popular Front, a coalition of far left parties, only received 3.6 percent of the vote but secured 11 seats thanks to an election law favoring small parties. But it is above all the ties between the

Popular Front and the UGTT that make the left a power to be reckoned with. The UGTT has street power. In 2011, it played a major role in transforming a local, gruesome protest incident in a small town of the interior into a nation-wide movement, and it was the major player in the quartet of organizations that, in 2013, forced Ennahda to engage in a national dialogue and to turn over power to a new cabinet. The ideas of the Popular Front and the UGTT are old-school left, and are thus alien to both Nida Tounes and Ennahda. But neither party can afford to ignore the organizations, given their proven capacity to mobilize opposition.

By contrast, the new political groups that have emerged since the revolution appear ephemeral. The party with the third largest number of seats in the parliament, The Free Patriotic Union, got much of its support because its founder and leader is a Berlusconi-like wealthy businessmen who owns a major soccer team. He could easily disappear in the next elections, just as other parties that did well in 2011 disappeared in 2014. But Bourguibists, Islamists, and the left are enmeshed in Tunisia and its history. The challenge now is for them is to agree on a cabinet that can govern.

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Tumult in Tunisia

Weathering the Economic and Political Storms

Brian Klaas

ANIS MILI / REUTERS

People gather outside the Constituent Assembly headquarters during a protest to demand the ouster of the Islamist-dominated government, in Tunis, July 28, 2013.

On January 16, Ridha Yahyaoui discovered that his name had been removed from a list of possible hires in Tunisia's Ministry of Education. Unemployed, and at the end of a job search that always came up empty, Yahyaoui climbed to the top of an electrical pole and electrocuted himself. The 28-year-old fell to the ground just 50 miles from where the Arab Spring began five years ago on the streets of Sidi Bouzid, when a browbeaten vegetable vendor set himself on fire. The impact of Yahyaoui's electrocution has sent similar shock

waves throughout Tunisia. And once again, people have taken to the streets.

Tunisia, the Arab Spring's lone success story, finds itself seeking to entrench its hard-won democracy at a time when most Tunisians believe that democracy has failed to live up to its lofty promises of a better life. Unemployment now stands at 15.3 percent, up from 12 percent in 2010. A third of young people are unemployed. In Kasserine, where Yahyaoui electrocuted himself, 17 percent of men and 38 percent of women are unemployed. For Tunisians who have jobs, underemployment is a chronic problem.

The macroeconomic picture is equally dim. Although inflation retreated to around four percent last year, it is still higher than before the revolution. Growth remains disappointing, stuck at around one percent, and tourism, once the mainstay of the country's economy, plummeted by around 20 percent after the terrorist attack at a beach resort in Sousse.

ZOHRA BENSEMRA / REUTERS

A bullet hole pockmarks the window of a car parked in the street near the

Imperial Marhaba resort in Sousse, Tunisia, June 30, 2015.

In October 2013, I had a lunch meeting in La Marsa, the glitzy suburb north of Tunis. This was the capital's posh European-style corner, a nod to French Riviera luxury where women in Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses and brightly colored couture skirts shopped alongside women in modest hijabs. Cruise ships docked a few miles to the south, allowing the passengers to stroll through La Marsa after visiting the ancient ruins of Carthage nearby. Years earlier, this was also where beneficiaries of former dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali spent their money.

While I waited for my guest to arrive, I chatted with the waiter about Tunisia's dictatorial past and its uncertain democratic future. Three years had passed since the country began its great democratic experiment—ousting Ben Ali, beginning the Arab Spring, adopting a new constitution, and holding its first democratic elections.

Aziz, a young 26-year-old with a dark, closely trimmed beard, was not impressed. He told me, "I miss him," referring to Ben Ali. "I preferred it before. So we hear he had an extravagant chateau here and 20 sports cars over there. So what? That's secondary. For us, the primary thing is whether the country works. It did before. It doesn't now."

At the height of the Arab Spring, opinions like Aziz's were rare. But today, even after Tunisia won its first Nobel Prize in October—awarded to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, a group of labor, industry, and human rights organizations, for their work on democratizing the country—Aziz's view is becoming more common. This is particularly true in poor areas of the rural interior that bear no resemblance—culturally, economically, or politically—to La Marsa. When the International Republican Institute polled Tunisians a year after the Arab Spring, 70 percent indicated

that they would prefer an unstable and flawed democracy rather than a stable and prosperous authoritarian government. Today, only 36 percent feel the same way; the national mood has flipped, and people see democracy increasingly as a luxury good that may not be worth its economic price.

That disgruntled side of Tunisia also extends to pockets of Tunis where university graduates struggle to find jobs, where families scramble to cope with spiraling inflation during their weekly grocery trips, or where port workers stay home now that cruise ships have become a rare sighting rather than a fixture of the Tunis shoreline.

This is the grim reality of a broken economy. The problem, of course, is not democracy. Instead, Tunisia has been saddled with crisis after crisis: a string of terrorist attacks that killed tourists visiting the country's museums and beaches, then petty infighting among the country's political parties that threatens to paralyze the legislature.

All three difficulties—with politics, economics, and security—are mutually reinforcing. Political volatility deters investment. Terrorism destroys tourism. And as the economy worsens, political bickering worsens, too. On top of that, when the politicians argue rather than solve problems, economic disillusionment grows. Terrorists have an easier time finding recruits (the country has already sent more than 3,000 fighters to the self-proclaimed Islamic State, also known as ISIS), and their operations get a little easier while the government's attention is diverted to fixing itself. This cycle reinforces stagnation.

ZOUBEIR SOUISSI / REUTERS

Tunisia's President Beji Caid Essebsi at the constituent assembly in Tunis, December 31, 2014.

Tunisia’s political leadership is neither blind to Yahyaoui’s death nor deaf to the chants of protesters who demand more opportunity and a better future. The government, which is in disarray after a series of mass resignations from Nidaa Tounes, a major party in the ruling coalition, nonetheless recently announced that 5,000 new public sector jobs would be made available to applicants from disadvantaged regions. This initiative complements the hundreds of other small-scale projects the government has launched to rectify the unevenness of public investment under Ben Ali, who spent significantly more on coastal regions than on the rural interior. These are promising first steps that will provide modest short-term economic relief, but they will not change the overall economic picture.

The West has already provided considerable assistance, with

hundreds of millions of dollars in loans, weapons sales, intelligence sharing, and technical support. But more needs to be done. The European Union should consider fast-tracking its negotiations for a free trade partnership with Tunisia. Three-quarters of Tunisia's exports go to the EU, and an agreement facilitating further trade and investment would benefit both sides. Such an agreement, alongside greater bilateral aid and loan guarantees from the United States, would help drive home "the message that having oil under the ground isn't the only way for Arabs to get rich," as Legatum Institute Senior Fellow Christian Caryl recently argued in Foreign Policy.

For assistance to be effective, though, the West needs a stable and pragmatic partner focused on reform. Although for years, Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda party and the secular Nidaa Tounes set aside major differences in order to govern, that coalition is now under threat. Many within Nidaa Tounes, which is led by current President Beji Caid Essebsi, have resigned, accusing Essebsi of gravitating toward an exclusive leadership style and of grooming his son to take the reins. Essebsi would be wise to thoroughly dispel both criticisms with renewed outreach and inclusiveness. His detractors would be wise to try to find common ground. Tunisia can no longer afford self-inflicted mistakes.

More than 2,000 years ago, Carthage was one of the most prosperous empires in the world, its foundations just a few miles away from the heart of modern-day Tunis. Over the course of several centuries, Carthage fought three wars with Rome, each of which threatened the empire's existence. It was the third, however, that led to Carthage's downfall. Elite rivalries at the dawn of that war weakened the regime, and Rome, taking advantage of a divided Carthage, eventually overran the city and burned it to the ground. Its broken pillars are still standing in the shadow of Tunisia's presidential palace, a reminder of how a great empire first

collapsed inward.

Tunisia’s current government faces three existential threats, too: terrorism, economic crisis, and political dysfunction. Like Carthage, the country can weather the first two—as long as the nation remains united. But if the third continues, it’s only a matter of time before the political disarray morphs into destructive dysfunction. If that happens, there will be a new wave of refugees, a new base for extremists, and most important for the long term, no credible model for Arab democracy in the Middle East. The United States and the European Union cannot afford to let that happen.

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The Muslim Brotherhood's Long Game

Egypt's Ruling Party Plots its Path to Power

Eric Trager

COURTESY REUTERS

Morsi delivers a speech during a ceremony in which the military handed over power to him.

In the 18 months since the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood has risen swiftly from the cave to the castle. It founded the now-dominant Freedom and Justice Party last April, won a massive plurality in the winter parliamentary elections, and, last week, celebrated as its candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won Egypt's presidential elections. After 84 years of using its nationwide social services networks to build an Islamic state in Egypt from the

ground up, the Brotherhood is, for the first time, poised to shape Egyptian society from the top down.

There is, however, a catch: most of the Brotherhood's gains exist in name only. In early June, a court order invalidated the parliamentary elections and dissolved the Brotherhood-dominated parliament. Then, just prior to the second round of the presidential elections, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) issued a constitutional declaration that seized executive authority from the presidency, ultimately rendering Morsi a mostly powerless figure.

But after weeks of mounting tension with the SCAF, including mass demonstrations against the junta's power grab, the Brotherhood is dialing things down. It fears that agitating for more authority now could foment unrest and alienate a deeply divided public. It is also wary of what happened in Algeria in 1991, when the country's military-backed government responded to the electoral victory of an Islamist party with a harsh crackdown that culminated in civil war. To avoid further violence and cement its place in Egyptian politics, the Brotherhood now hopes to create a period of calm in the short run so that it can act more assertively in the future.

To begin with, the Brotherhood is attempting to forge a unified front with Egypt's other political parties. It began these efforts a week before the announcement of Morsi's victory to dissuade the SCAF from rigging the elections for Mubarak-era candidate Ahmed Shafik. During two days of intense negotiations, Morsi met with a wide spectrum of political groups and activists, promising to name a woman and a Christian as vice presidents and to appoint a cabinet that would not be dominated by the Brotherhood. Brotherhood leaders have used this agreement to prove that they intend to build a representative government. "We are standing with all political powers for the same demands," Brotherhood parliamentarian Khaled Deeb told me.

Yet this is not the first time that the Brotherhood has attempted to insulate itself by aligning with other factions, and history suggests that these agreements are typically short-lived. In June 2011, the Brotherhood joined the nationalist Wafd party in creating the Democratic Alliance for Egypt, an electoral coalition that at one point included approximately forty political parties ranging from socialist to Salafist. But by September, the Democratic Alliance broke down over the Brotherhood's insistence on reserving 40 percent of the coalition's candidacies for its own members, thereby leaving too few seats to satisfy its other partners, most of whom bolted. It hardly mattered: three months of unity enabled the Brotherhood to build its profile as a leading political entity, and it ultimately won a 47-percent plurality in the winter parliamentary elections.

The Brotherhood's current unity project appears destined for the same fate. Despite initial reports that Brotherhood figures would fill only 30 percent of the new cabinet, Brotherhood parliamentary leader Farid Ismail recently said in Al-Ahram that the organization may take up to half. The Brotherhood also seems intent on controlling the cabinet selection process to ensure that many non-Brotherhood ministers are non-ideological experts who are balanced out by Brotherhood-affiliated deputy ministers. "We have more than one [Brotherhood] candidate for each cabinet position, and some of those might be deputies," Brotherhood parliamentary leader Saad al-Husseini told me. "And we might nominate someone from a technocratic [background] or ask the other parties for nominations."

The Brotherhood's promise to nominate a Christian and female vice president is also more about symbolism than genuine power sharing. Brotherhood sources have suggested that Morsi may appoint up to five vice presidents, thereby watering down the influence of the Christian and female deputies. Moreover, to prevent Morsi from being succeeded

by either a woman or a Copt in the event of his death, the Brotherhood will seek to maintain the current constitutional clause mandating that the speaker of the parliament -- currently Brotherhood leader Saad al-Katatny -- assume the presidency. "A state with a Muslim majority can't be ruled by a non-Muslim," Brotherhood Guidance Office leader Mahmoud Hussein told me, citing a sharia principle.

The second prong of the Brotherhood's strategy for temporary calm involves its coordination with the military. "This relationship was established from the first day," Deeb, the Brotherhood parliamentarian, told me. "No clash, no total agreement." In the week leading up to the announcement of Morsi's victory, Brotherhood leaders Katatny and Khairat al-Shater, among others, met frequently with SCAF generals, apparently hashing out a deal to ensure Morsi's election while tabling other areas of disagreement. The existence of these meetings, which now include Morsi, have led to a shift in the Brotherhood's rhetoric. After months of accusing the SCAF of seeking to engineer the presidential elections and stage a coup, Brotherhood leaders are now praising the SCAF's stewardship. At an inaugural event on Saturday, Morsi declared, "The SCAF has fulfilled its promises and the oath it made, to not be an alternative to popular will."

The Brotherhood has also signaled that it will now accept several key SCAF demands that it had previously opposed. In this vein, immediately after his electoral victory was announced, Morsi stated that he would only be sworn in before the parliament, thereby pressuring the SCAF to reverse the parliament's dissolution. Yet he ultimately agreed to be sworn in before the Supreme Constitutional Court, which implicitly recognized the validity of the SCAF's constitutional declaration.

Brotherhood leaders have also intimated that they can live with the power that the SCAF appropriated to itself via the

constitutional declaration, at least for now. "The constitutional declaration doesn't give the SCAF full power -- just the right for legislation," al-Husseini, the Brotherhood parliamentary leader, told me. "The president has veto power." The Brotherhood even seems willing to accept SCAF's autonomy over military budgets, a key SCAF demand, so long as a small civilian committee is briefed on the details. "I can't bring the military budget in front of the parliament and discuss it publicly," Brotherhood parliamentarian Azza al-Garf told me. "It should be discussed among a few people in parliament secretly." As a result, the military's vast business holdings, which are said to encompass between 15 and 40 percent of the Egyptian economy, appear safe for the time being.

The Brotherhood's arrangement with the SCAF is not surprising. It is consistent with the organization's long-held strategy of avoiding confrontation with more powerful authorities by negotiating the extent of its political activities. In fact, Morsi was the Brotherhood's point man in these negotiations during the last five years of Mubarak's rule, using the dealings to coordinate the Brotherhood's participation in parliamentary elections and limited interaction with various protest movements. As a cohesive, 84 year-old society, the Brotherhood typically places organizational goals, such as achieving power incrementally, over broader societal goals, such as ending autocratic rule more immediately. "Our program is a long-term one, not a short-term one," Morsi told me in August 2010. "If we are rushing things, then I don't think that this leads to a real stable position."

This hardly means, however, that the Brotherhood intends to accommodate the military indefinitely. Last November, for example, the SCAF and the Brotherhood struck a deal in which the Brotherhood agreed to avoid violent Tahrir Square protests in exchange for the SCAF's agreement to hold

parliamentary elections on time. But the pact broke down in March, when the SCAF first threatened to dissolve the parliament and the Brotherhood suddenly dropped its promise that it would not run a presidential candidate. Moreover, the Brotherhood appears unlikely to accept long-term limits on the authority that it has won in the elections. "The army is owned by the people," said Brotherhood parliamentarian Osama Suleiman told me. "[Civilian oversight of the military] is the popular will -- and nobody can stop popular will."

In short, the long-anticipated confrontation between the SCAF and Brotherhood has been delayed -- and, for that, many Egyptians are thankful. After all, Cairo seemed on the brink of disaster a few weeks ago, when tens of thousands of mostly Islamist protesters packed Tahrir Square, some declaring themselves ready to die if Shafik was named president. But the current calm, and the Brotherhood's attempt to appear inclusive while also accommodating the SCAF, will not last. The Brotherhood will use this period to build its legitimacy as Egypt's next ruling party, and resume its push for more authority once the temperature cools down.

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Morsi's Mistake

The Error Behind the Uproar in Egypt

Steven A. Cook

Once again, Egyptians are out in the streets. Yet these demonstrations are quite different from those in January and February 2011, when people of every faith, class, and political persuasion joined together to bring down a dictator. Indeed, Egypt's triumph of national unity has turned into a bitter impasse over narrow interests. Demonstrators surround the Supreme Constitutional Court not to protect the sacred institution but to shut it down, judges declare an open-ended strike, and groups of angry protesters rally against one another, each challenging the other's right to a place in the national dialogue. In the abstract, heated debate is a good thing for countries undergoing political transitions. In Egypt, however, the result has been instability.

There are a variety of explanations for Egypt's tribulations. Some argue that decisions made by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) back in February and March 2011, including on the timing of the transition and the principles that guided it, explain the current bind. Others point to the lack of a permanent constitution and parliament, which the SCAF dissolved in June 2012 at the recommendation of Egypt's highest court. These critics argue that the absence of rules, regulations, and laws left the country vulnerable to the whims of incompetent generals and then authoritarian Islamists. Egyptian liberals and secular revolutionaries, meanwhile, fear the Islamist ideology of President Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader. Egypt's newly approved draft constitution, which includes a particular interpretation of Islamic law, and a massive Brotherhood-sponsored rally last Saturday to "save sharia" from opponents of the new code only reinforce their fears.

There is truth in all of these explanations. Certainly, it would have been easier to consolidate a new political order if the SCAF had laid out a more sensible transition, if the officers had not dissolved the People's Assembly, or if the drafting of the highest law in the land had been more inclusive. But the deadlock in Egyptian politics runs deeper. Morsi's decisions last month to grant himself powers above any court, retry the deposed leader Hosni Mubarak, and rush the passing of a new Brotherhood-driven draft constitution -- and his party's unwillingness to acknowledge the legitimate concerns of millions of Egyptians -- result from a worldview that should be familiar to Egyptians.

The Brothers, like the Free Officers who came to power in 1952 and produced Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Mubarak, are what the Yale anthropologist James Scott calls "high modernists." High modernism, which places a premium on scientific knowledge and elites with special skills, is inherently authoritarian. It might seem a strange designation

for the Brotherhood, since most observers think of it as a religious movement. But in reality, the group has used religion to advance a political agenda. To suggest that the organization's leaders are dilettantes when it comes to Islam would be an overstatement, but the majority of them are first and foremost doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, and engineers. They think of themselves as a vanguard that is uniquely qualified to rebuild Egypt and realize its seemingly endless quest for modernization. Moreover, they believe that the people entrusted them with the responsibility to do so as a result of free and fair elections in late 2011 and 2012.

With the Brotherhood in control of the now-dissolved People's Assembly, Shura Council, Constituent Assembly, and the presidency, this vanguard thought it could choose a path for Egypt within the councils of its own organization. There was no need for consensus or negotiation, hence Morsi's August 12 decision to decapitate the national security establishment and his subsequent efforts to place sympathizers in influential positions within the state-controlled media. In a television interview broadcast on November 29, he even called his recent decree an effort to "fulfill the demands of the public and the revolution." There is, he implied, no reason to question his decisions, which were in the best interest of Egypt.

Morsi's miscalculation -- which both he and the Brotherhood later compounded -- was to think that everyone understood the results of the Egyptian elections the way the Brothers did. In other words, that they gave him and his party a mandate to rule with little regard for those who might disagree. The Brotherhood's discrediting of the tens of thousands who turned out in protest as felool (remnants of the old regime) and thugs was not only positively Mubarak-esque but also reinforced Morsi's "Brothers know best" approach to Egypt's political problems. It is easy to dismiss the opposition's charge that Morsi is the "new Mubarak" as hyperbole from a

group of people who have become well-versed in manufacturing outrage. Still, they have a point. Both men share the high-modernist worldview, which did not bode well for political reform under the previous regime and does not augur well for democracy in Egypt's future.

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Even Good Coups Are Bad

Lessons for Egypt from the Philippines, Venezuela, and Beyond

Omar Encarnación

AMR ABDALLAH DALSH / COURTESY REUTERS

A supporter of deposed Egyptian President Morsi stands in front of army soldiers at Republican Guard headquarters, July 8, 2013.

To understand the swift and dramatic demise of Egypt's first democratically elected leader and what it might portend for the country's future, it helps to take a broad comparative perspective. The manner in which the country's military deposed President Mohamed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated Freedom and Justice Party, is by no means an isolated case. In fact, it fits rather perfectly within the model of a civil society coup, a concept I first described in a 2002 World Policy Journal essay that explained the brief

removal from power of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez by a coalition of business, labor, and civic groups. Other scholars have subsequently applied the idea to other coups, such as those in the Philippines in 2001, in Ecuador in 2002, in Thailand in 2006, and in Honduras in 2009. All of these cases show that civil society coups are not the fix for democracy that they purport to be, which looks to be true in Egypt as well.

Endemic to new democracies, civil society coups entail the removal from power of an elected leader through sustained protest, usually with the aid of the military. Indeed, it is the partnership between civil society and the military -- not usually known for acting in concert -- that distinguishes a civil society coup from an ordinary one. More often than not, those behind the coup justify it by claiming that they intend to rescue democracy, which is paradoxical since they are, in fact, uprooting it. This is Tocqueville's civil society gone rogue; rather than working patiently and discreetly toward improving the quality of democracy, it turns angry and restless and plots for sudden and radical political change.

In my original essay on Chávez's removal from office, I identified three preconditions for a civil society coup. The first is the rise to power of a leader whose commitment to democracy is at best suspect. The second is a political apparatus that fails to meet public expectations about economic growth and stability, usually because of its corruption, incompetence, and neglect of the country's basic needs. The third is the emergence of civil society actors -- trade unions, religious associations, and civic groups -- rather than formally organized political forces, which have either disintegrated or which never fully developed in the first place, as the main opposition to the government. The combined result of these conditions is the emergence of an adversarial relationship between an invigorated civil society and a delegitimized political system against a background of

widespread societal discontent and the collapse of the rule of law. Under such conditions, disputes and political crises are solved on the streets rather than in the legislature.

All of these conditions materialized in Egypt. Once in office, Morsi wasted very little time showing his ambivalence toward democracy. Last November, he attempted to give himself extrajudicial powers that would have essentially put him above the law. He claimed that he needed these powers to get around a hostile judiciary that remains staffed primarily by holdovers from the previous regime. But Egyptians saw it as nothing more than a power grab. The following month, when Morsi pushed through a new constitution that dialed back women's rights and enhanced the military's power, among other things, many Egyptians felt betrayed.

Morsi's brief time in office was also marred by economic turmoil. Living conditions in Egypt are worse now than they were under Mubarak. According to the IMF, before the revolution, 40 percent of the country lived in poverty. Now, 50 percent do. And in the weeks leading up to the coup, acute shortages of food, fuel, and other basic necessities followed one on top of the other. To be sure, Morsi inherited a very troubled economy. As Ibrahim Saif, an economist at the Carnegie Endowment, put it, the revolution left "a hostile environment for private-sector investment," fueled by "a perceived risk of expropriation," as well as damaging "taxation, stringent regulations, export and production subsidies, and high transaction costs associated with red tape." At the same time, however, Morsi's policies aggravated political instability and uncertainty. That, in turn, made it nearly impossible to restore the once vibrant tourist sector, shore up investor confidence, or convince international donors, such as the IMF and the World Bank, that the new democracy was on firm footing.

Finally, for the past year and a half, it has been difficult to

discern who, exactly, comprises the opposition. That is a common characteristic of democratic transitions engineered from below, which tend not to generate a unified political opposition but, rather, a constellation of opposition groups whose divisions are bigger than whatever difference they may have with the government. That makes it hard to forge compromises between the government and its discontents, and even harder to construct a loyal opposition that counterbalances the party in power but channels people's grievances through the political system. The emergence of a loyal opposition is just as important to democratic consolidation as an effective democratic leader. The disorganized nature of the Egyptian opposition was on full display during the protests that led to the military's intervention, as a motley crew of pro-democracy groups came together with no more common purpose than driving the Muslim Brotherhood out of power.

There is an inherent tendency to view civil society coups as good coups (as opposed to bad ones masterminded by the military without the support of the masses). After all, civil society coups hold the alluring promise of resetting the democratization process by flushing out an experiment with elections gone awry and creating a tabula rasa upon which to create a new democracy. That is the view adopted by Egyptian liberals, who have been at pains to even avoid using the word "coup." Mohamed El Baradei, the Nobel-laureate diplomat, former Director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Egypt's most prominent liberal, told The New York Times that "Morsi had bungled the country's transition to a inclusive democracy." He added, "As Yogi Berra said, it's déjà vu all over again, but hopefully this time we will get it right."

But the notion that a civil society coup can restart democracy is wildly optimistic. Venezuela and the Philippines suggest two likelier scenarios. In Venezuela, waves of strikes followed

the proposed nationalization of Venezuela's national oil company (PDVSA). The military took Chávez hostage for some 48 hours before withdrawing plans to install an interim president and to call new elections, and accepting Chávez's restoration. Forcing the military's reversal was its realization that it could not contain Chavismo, the best-organized political force in the country, which had fierce loyalty to its founding leader -- a point driven home by violent counter-coup demonstrations that left some 20 people dead. Chávez ruled Venezuela for another decade, until his death, earlier this year, becoming more vengeful and authoritarian as he went. He also turned increasingly anti-American, since he blamed the United States for his ouster. Although the evidence of American participation in the Venezuelan coup is contested, the Bush administration did cheer Chávez's ousting as "a victory for democracy" before correcting course after most Latin American governments had denounced developments in Venezuela as a coup.

The parallels with Egypt are worth noting. As in Venezuela, the coup in Egypt pushed from power the best-organized political force in the country, the Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike Chávez, of course, Morsi is not seen by the Brotherhood rank and file as the very embodiment of the movement. But so far the movement's leadership is resolute in its insistence that Morsi be returned to power, suggesting that his restoration cannot be ruled out. "There is no plan B," a spokesman for the Brotherhood said to ABC News, adding, "We either return the president back to his rightful place or they are going to have to shoot us in the street."

In the Philippines in 2001, the military ousted President Joseph Estrada after four days of intense popular protests during the Second People Power Revolution, a name that paid homage to the People Power revolution, which ousted strongman Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. After giving Estrada the boot, the military installed Vice President Gloria Arroyo as

the country's new leader. Arroyo, who served as president until 2010, had a rocky tenure. In no small part, that was because she was tainted by the illegitimate manner in which her predecessor had been deposed. She managed to survive several violent counterprotests by supporters of Estrada (who himself became a shadow figure that haunted Arroyo's entire presidency), including a massive storming of the presidential palace by some three million protesters in 2001 who claimed to represent the Third People Power Revolution. In Egypt, finding an acceptable replacement to Morsi is already proving a challenge, as can be seen in the quick rise and fall of El Baradei as a potential interim prime minister.

Civil society coups are seldom, if ever, a good thing for democracy. Indeed, Egyptians might have been better off letting Morsi serve his full term in office rather than aborting his clumsy but democratic tenure. For now, Egypt might be lucky to wind up like Venezuela or the Philippines, since it could certainly chart a more tragic course -- a civil war -- a prospect that only looks likelier as violence against Morsi supporters continues. If the last few decades have taught observers anything, it is that democracy depends, in no small measure, on people waiting to defeat the incumbent government at the ballot box rather than in the streets.

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First They Came for the Islamists

Egypt’s Tunisian Future

Michael J. Koplow

COURTESY REUTERS

Former Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Argentina, 1997

An Islamist political party does well at the polls, and an authoritarian regime goes after it with a vengeance, killing its activists and arresting its leaders. The party is driven underground while secularists and other political groups applaud the government’s harsh measures, all taken in the name of eliminating a terrorist threat. Meanwhile, the regime and the non-Islamist parties assure the world that once the Islamists have been dealt with, the regular political process will resume again.

So it has happened in Egypt, but it is also the story of Tunisia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when hopes for a democratic transition were smashed after a campaign of repression that first targeted Islamists but eventually grew into a much wider effort to eliminate all political opposition. Tunisia's experience offers a glimpse of what may be yet to come in Egypt -- and suggests that Egyptian secularists should think twice before supporting the army's efforts to eradicate the Muslim Brotherhood.

After replacing President Habib Bourguiba in a bloodless coup in November 1987, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, a military officer, embarked on a program of liberalization and democratization that was at that point unprecedented in the region. His government released all political prisoners and gave them amnesty, revised the laws governing the press and political parties, and got every political bloc -- including the Islamist Ennahda Party -- to sign a national pact guaranteeing civil liberties and free elections.

Those elections were held on April 2, 1989, and were at the time the most competitive in the country's history, if not in the entire Arab world. Although the winner-take-all system guaranteed that Ben Ali's party would carry the day, given its organizational advantages developed over decades of unopposed rule, the president and most observers assumed that the secular opposition parties would emerge as the dominant opposition. Instead, the Islamists received the highest share of the opposition vote, 14.5 percent, a figure that was likely deflated due to fraud.

Just after the election, The New York Times declared, "Tunisia is undergoing a transition from a one-man dictatorship to a much more open society with a sleight of hand that could furnish lessons for Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader." The article went on to quote the head of the Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights saying, "I

am absolutely certain of Ben Ali's good will."

As it turned out, though, the prospect of a strong Islamist opposition, and especially of an Islamist government at some point down the road, was too much for Ben Ali and the Tunisian state to bear. The government launched a brutal crackdown, killing 1,000 Islamists, jailing another 30,000, and forcing into exile the leader of Ennahda, Rachid al-Ghannouchi. The regime justified its actions by claiming that the Islamists were terrorists out to sow discord and tear Tunisia apart. Only because of the national security threat that they presented, Ben Ali argued, were the Islamists being targeted.

Even as the government's campaign against Islamists turned violent and repressive, Tunisia's secular opposition parties cheered it on. Fearful of the possibility of Tunisia's Islamists emulating the Algerian intifada taking place next door, the secularists had no problem with the state neutralizing the threat of political Islam. Furthermore, given the country's history of secularism, most Tunisians did not want to see Islamists of any stripe coming to power, and so they watched quietly as Ennahda was driven underground.

The twist is that once Ben Ali finished with the Islamists, he trained his sights on the rest of the opposition as well. Even if his crackdown initially stemmed from a legitimate ideological fear of Islamism, once he started down the authoritarian path, it was only a short skip and a jump to viewing all political opponents as enemies. In early 1992, the government shut down secular newspapers and magazines, imprisoned liberal journalists, and passed a new law of associations that curtailed the actions of human rights groups. A whole generation of secular opposition leaders, including Tunisia's current president, Moncef Marzouki, found themselves in jail. In the 1994 sham presidential election, Ben Ali ran unopposed after disallowing all other candidates from running, and in

1999, he was “reelected” with 99 percent of the vote.

Egypt is now in the throes of a similar campaign to rid the country of its Islamists. The military rulers have charged Muslim Brotherhood members with terrorism and murder, and they are considering formally labeling the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and banning it entirely. Although Hosni Mubarak, Egypt’s erstwhile strongman, did not allow the Muslim Brotherhood to participate in politics formally, even he did not go so far as to ban the group, and the contemplation of such a move in conjunction with the unprecedented arrest of the Brotherhood’s supreme guide demonstrates just how far the military is willing to go. To be sure, the Brotherhood-led government under former President Mohamed Morsi was hardly a paragon of democracy, and Brotherhood members have indeed resorted to violence since his ouster. But the terrorism charges represent a major escalation in anti-Islamist rhetoric since the military coup, and they allow the army to justify all its actions in the name of security.

In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood’s secular opponents, many of whom opposed the military when it last ruled the state following the toppling of Mubarak, are not only staying out of the streets but also actively supporting the anti-Brotherhood campaign. Much like their Tunisian counterparts two decades ago, Egyptian secularists have convinced themselves that the government is out to eradicate only the Islamists, rather than all political opposition. The enemy of their enemy, many of them figure, is their friend. This frame of mind is spreading among less stridently secular Egyptians as well, with former Morsi voters and Egyptians who were previously sympathetic to the Brotherhood lauding the military’s moves.

For the military, the support from secular parties and ordinary Egyptians is crucial. The army’s removal of Morsi

was made possible only by the presence of millions of protesters in the streets. Similarly, the widening crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood has been a much easier task, given the political and rhetorical support the army has received from Egyptian liberals. Were prominent liberal and secular voices to denounce the army's moves, it would not bring an end to the Muslim Brotherhood's troubles altogether, but it might constrain the military's range of actions, just as public outrage against the last military government led to an expedited election and transition process. Yet for now, Egypt's secularists seem to be backing the military to the hilt.

This view is shortsighted. Looking at the bigger picture, Egypt's secular parties should realize that the authoritarian genie is extremely difficult to put back in the bottle once it has been released in the name of national security. Although the army is likely to return to the barracks at some point and resume ruling from behind the scenes -- it has promised to hold elections by 2014 -- it will not allow secular parties to construct a democratic system, let alone a liberal one. Egyptians are in for a rude awakening if they believe that just because the military has not yet put measures in place to repress all political opposition or begun to arrest secular figures, that it will not eventually do so. As Egyptians remember all too well, the allegedly temporary state of emergency put in place following President Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981 lasted 31 years. Today, there is little reason to think that the current monthlong state of emergency will expire along with the Muslim Brotherhood's political fortunes.

If history is any guide, authoritarian governments do not confine their repression to only one category of opponents, and coercive measures taken in the name of security always morph into something larger. The secularists should think twice before cheering on the regime's campaign against the

Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists, no matter what type of language the government is using to couch its antidemocratic actions. The lesson of Tunisia is that once the Islamists are gone, the secularist opposition is going to be next.

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Can a Myth Rule a Nation?

The Truth About Sisi's Candidacy in Egypt

Joshua Stacher

MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY / COURTESY REUTERS

Supporters of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Tahrir Square in Cairo, January 25, 2014.

Anyone who claims to possess full political power in post-Mubarak Egypt is lying. That might be hard to believe, given how large the military looms these days. But the vision of an almighty military -- propagated by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), its supporters, and those desperate for stability -- is a mirage. Soon enough, it will dissipate, revealing deep tensions in Egypt and dwindling options for what is often assumed to be Egypt’s strongest institution.

On Monday, SCAF, the governing body of the Egyptian

military, unanimously gave Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the military's commander in chief and Egypt's current defense minister, its blessing to run for president. (Indeed, it considers his nomination a "mandate and an obligation.") Sisi, whom the interim president promoted to the rank of field marshal the same day, has yet to announce his candidacy. Still, most everyone has accepted it -- and his eventual presidency -- as a fait accompli, the final step in the military's reconquest of Egypt and the country's return to the days of former President Hosni Mubarak.

But that is not the whole story.

Last June, Mubarak supporters and some revolutionaries came together to oust elected Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi. Since then, large parts of society have coalesced around Sisi as the personification of a renewed nationalist strain of Egyptian power. He is lionized in the state media and praised by figures from Mubarak's defunct ruling party and crony capitalist networks. Much of the general population, outside of the Muslim Brotherhood and revolutionaries, view him as being above the political fray. Brides profess to want to marry him, and men project his masculinity to reinforce their patriarchy. And those clamoring for stability -- from media moguls to average Egyptians and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry -- talk of democratic roadmaps and upcoming elections while sweeping political reality under the rug.

Sisi has tried to cement his position in politics by initiating an antiterror campaign, launched in late July of last year. The state's coercive machinery has since increased its targeting of antigovernment protests and sit-ins, which has produced a death toll in the thousands. It is more than just a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, which Egypt's military-backed government has officially labeled a terrorist organization. The interim government and security forces have also killed and

injured non-Brotherhood protesters, jailed revolutionary activists and nonstate-controlled journalists, lodged legal accusations against politicians who rose to prominence after the uprising, and slandered dissenting academics. The campaign has coincided with an uptick in bombings, assassinations, and a Sinai-based insurgency against the state by an Islamist group, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis. As the body count rises (security forces killed nearly 70 people last weekend), it is becoming clear that the state has actually weakened over the past three years. The government's policy of using violence against dissenters is merely the latest effort to fix a leaky boat. But it will keep Egypt on the brink of revolution.

To understand why, consider what happened as protesters chased Mubarak's last government out of office in January and February 2011: The military rolled in to protect infrastructure and its own factories and then carved up Mubarak's ruling coalition while everyone else focused on Mubarak's resignation. The SCAF exiled or imprisoned some crony capitalists and the government's pro-economic-reform team because it did not control them. It eliminated many of its competitors in the interior ministry and brought them under its authority. For example, the SCAF renamed the State Security Investigations Service(Homeland Security) , Egypt's draconian domestic spying apparatus and reshuffled its leadership in March 2011.

Other powerful and potentially competitive intelligence agencies were not spared. Take, for instance, Omar Suleiman's General Intelligence Service. An assassination attempt against him in Cairo during the uprising was never explained, and most accounts speculate that the military was behind the conspiracy because no one was ever apprehended. He can be forgiven, then, for quickly retiring after Mubarak's departure. Last August's appointment of Mohamed Farid el-Tohamy -- a former military intelligence officer -- to run the General Intelligence Service demonstrates just how fully the

military had dismantled Suleiman's old networks.

By the time the revolution was over, nearly all political control rested in the SCAF's hands. At that point, the council had a number of options. It could have governed on its own, but it did not want to. Instead, the generals decided to protect their interests but hide behind a civilian face. So it sought out a civilian administration that could not challenge it. In the process, it whittled Mubarak's regime, which had been designed to serve multiple constituencies and networks, into a system that would serve the interests of the military alone.

The SCAF reached out to a previous foe, which, it believed, could help demobilize a restive society. The Muslim Brotherhood was given a choice between siding with the revolution or the military. Brotherhood leaders broke toward the generals, believing that, if they were pliant enough, they would be indispensible to the military. In the end, however, Morsi and his group could not deliver what the military wanted: public stability or an end to continuous street activity. In fact, their presence and blatantly partisan rule made protests worse. So the military and its supporters consulted with and allowed the Tamarod protesters to turn up the heat on Morsi. Their street mobilization in late June, in turn, pushed the generals back into action.

In one sense, the military got its way. It demonstrated its sway over the Egyptian state when some observers believed that it had, in fact, been sidelined by Morsi, who forced the retirement of a handful of senior generals in August 2012, including the then defense minister and head of the SCAF, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi. But in another sense, the military damaged the foundations of the regime it inherited. By pushing out an elected official, it discredited the notion of elections as a useful tool for rotating and transferring political power among civilian groups. Gone was any last inkling that the military could stand neutrally by,

allow electoral victors to emerge, and not interfere with the process.

Now, with no other organized civilian group left to work with and its options limited, the SCAF hurled Sisi into the spotlight and began to create the myth of an Oz-like wizard controlling the state. Doing so bought Egypt's generals some time, but the task before them -- engineering a new regime -- needs more than that. The longer the transition process drags on, the more cornered the SCAF finds itself. In fact, although Sisi's nomination for the presidency might have appeared inevitable or destined, one could argue that it was the SCAF's increasing weakness and paranoia that motivated his impending candidacy. After all, given his popularity, Sisi could anoint anyone as Egypt's next preferred president. Open elections would likely be a landslide for his chosen candidate, and the process would preserve both the vestige of procedural democracy and the SCAF's ability to intervene. Yet the generals named Sisi, looking to him to finish off the revolution and reign in the Brotherhood's participation in politics.

But beyond creepy state press portrayals of Sisi's virility and Egyptians parading around in gold-colored Sisi masks, as many were in Tahrir Square on the third anniversary of the revolution on January 25, the junta has little upon which to build a real regime. Sisi has no economic policies or political programs to speak of. The military-backed government's base is narrow, and since it has no way to incorporate dissenters, it will generate more dissent and state-generated violence.

For now, Sisi and the SCAF have amassed the popularity of a fickle public. But the winds could change at any time. In years past, the military was able to pivot at will, showing remarkable flexibility. But now, with Sisi's nomination, it has made the military the central player in the drama. Its role in politics now publically recognized, it will face more scrutiny

as it tries to pull the levers. It has no civilian partner on which to pin the blame, and it is losing the support of its onetime grass-roots ally, Tamarod. As the regime-in-formation resorts more and more frequently to force, it will only exacerbate Egypt's political crisis.

It is telling that the only institution that emerged with a good hand after Mubarak fell is increasingly playing with limited cards: all clubs and no hearts, diamonds, or spades. Although it might seem in control for now, the public will not tolerate an increasingly iron fist forever. Instability and violence will eat away at the myth of the omnipotent, newly promoted field marshal and the system's narrative of stability. Once that happens, the ongoing social struggle will move on to its next phase.

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Egypt's Durable Misery

Why Sisi's Regime Is Stable

Eric Trager

AMR ABDALLAH DALSH / REUTERS

A riot police officer stands guard outside a police academy, where ousted Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi's second trial session was due to take place, on the outskirts of Cairo, January 8, 2014.

The past two years have been the most violent and repressive in Egypt’s contemporary history. Ever since the country’s military responded to mass protests by ousting the country’s first elected president, the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated Mohamed Morsi, in July 2013, at least 1,800 civilians and 700 security personnel have been killed, tens of thousands have been imprisoned, and severe restrictions have been placed on media, civil society, and protest activity. And this sorry story is set to worsen. Following the assassination of Egypt’s

prosecutor general on June 29, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi blamed the Brotherhood and vowed an ever-harsher crackdown on the group, including tougher laws to ensure that Muslim Brothers on death row are executed sooner. In response, the Brotherhood endorsed the sudden upsurge in attacks on infrastructure, including electricity towers. And jihadists affiliated with the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS) launched a new round of attacks, including the July 1 bombings in North Sinai that killed dozens of troops and the recent attack on the Italian consulate in Cairo.

Yet despite this bleak security outlook, Egypt is more politically stable than it's been in years. Unlike the divided regimes that collapsed in the face of mass protests in January 2011 and June 2013, the Sisi regime is internally unified. And the various state institutions and civil groups that constitute the regime will likely remain tightly aligned for one basic reason: they view the Muslim Brotherhood as a significant threat to their respective interests and thus see the regime's crackdown on the organization as essential to their own survival. Moreover, as many and perhaps most Egyptians see it, the Sisi regime's internal unity is the one thing preventing the country from descending into the chaotic statelessness that has overtaken other Arab Spring countries, and they strongly prefer even a repressive and somewhat inept regime to what they see as a far worse alternative. So even as Egypt's domestic security becomes more tenuous, the status quo is sustainable, because regime change appears highly unlikely in the near term.

> *The Egyptian regime's survival does not depend on Sisi's longevity.*

To be sure, the Sisi regime's durability hardly implies that Sisi himself is durable. If anything, he faces a substantial risk of assassination. Egyptians speak about it so openly that Sisi

had to address the matter during an interview prior to his election last year, in which he acknowledged two attempts on his life in the months following Morsi's ouster. That threat hasn't dissipated: Muslim Brothers call for Sisi's death explicitly, and the jihadist group Ajnad Misr planted bombs outside the presidential palace last June, only weeks after Sisi took office. Sisi thus sleeps in an undisclosed location—a sharp break in protocol from his predecessors, whose places of residence were well protected but not state secrets.

CHARLES PLATIAU / REUTERS

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Paris, November 2014.

Yet the regime's survival does not depend on Sisi's longevity. Although the regime often presents him as a Nasser-like "strongman," it is more accurate to think of him as the CEO of the loose coalition of institutions and interest groups that backed Morsi's ouster in 2013, supported Sisi's presidential candidacy in 2014, and now make up his regime. This coalition includes state bodies such as the military, intelligence, police, and judiciary, as well as nonstate entities

that serve as the state's appendages in the countryside, such as the powerful clans of the Nile Delta and tribes of Upper Egypt. The regime also draws critical support from the business community and the private media, which were particularly influential in rallying the masses against Morsi two years ago. And despite the political uncertainty and severe violence that followed Morsi's ouster, these power centers have held together for over two years now for one overarching reason: they share an interest in destroying the Muslim Brotherhood, which substantially threatened their interests during Morsi's 369 days in power.

HOW TO WIN ENEMIES AND ALIENATE PEOPLE

The Brotherhood's defenders often depict the organization as "gradualist," meaning that it seeks to implement its Islamist agenda through formal politics, unlike terrorist groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda. But there was nothing gradualist about the Brotherhood's attempt to combat, rather than coopt or cooperate with, these power centers after Morsi won the 2012 presidential elections. Morsi sought to undercut the judiciary through his November 2012 edict that placed his own decrees above judicial scrutiny, and the Brotherhood-dominated upper parliamentary house tried to retire over 3,000 judges through new legislation. The Brotherhood additionally used its influence over the constitution-writing process in late 2012 to ban all parliamentarians affiliated with former President Hosni Mubarak's ruling party from participating in elections for ten years, which effectively excluded the rural clans and tribes that make up the major power centers of the countryside, whose leaders often served in the Mubarak-era parliament. The Brotherhood similarly tried to sideline the business community by creating its own business organization, whose leaders accompanied Morsi on his foreign trips.

Meanwhile, as media criticism of Morsi's increasingly

autocratic and incompetent rule mounted in early 2013, Muslim Brothers carried posters of TV anchors' heads in nooses at their rallies, vowing to "cleanse" the media. By the same token, Brotherhood leaders' calls for "restructuring and reforming" the Interior Ministry put Egypt's police on notice, driving many officers to participate in the anti-Morsi uprising in their uniforms. And although Morsi tried to court the military by respecting its autonomy over national security matters and its own internal affairs, he undermined the arrangement through aggressive foreign policy pronouncements during his final month in office. Indeed, from the generals' standpoint, Morsi usurped the military's national security responsibilities when he declared that "all options are open" against Ethiopia's construction of a Nile dam and then endorsed the Syrian jihad at a Cairo Stadium rally alongside a group of radical Salafist clerics in mid-June 2013.

ASMAA WAGUIH / REUTERS

A man carries pictures of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser during a celebration in Cairo of Sisi's victory in Egypt's presidential election, June 2014.

Of course, the alignment of these institutions and interests isn't new: it goes back to the Mubarak days. But they have never been closer. Under Mubarak, for example, the military viewed the Interior Ministry as its rival, which is why the brass effectively stood to the side as the police collapsed during the first days of the 2011 uprising. Similarly, some of the more popular private media outlets publicized police abuses under Mubarak and were harshly critical of the military junta that ruled Egypt for 16 months following Mubarak's ouster. And there were also divisions within these power centers, such as the rift between the aging military leadership and the younger officers that Morsi repaired in August 2012, when he fired the top generals and appointed Sisi as defense minister.

Intraregime tensions haven't entirely dissipated, of course. As Michael Hanna of the Century Foundation noted in a recent report, the leaked phone conversations of top military officials, resurgent media criticism of the Interior Ministry, and the security establishment's open antipathy toward former air force general and presidential candidate Ahmed Shafik are all signs of elite division. Yet in every instance thus far, the tensions have dissipated quickly, because the regime's various components are ultimately more unified in their desire to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood than they are divided by anything else.

> *The regime's components are more unified in their desire to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood than they are divided by anything else.*

If they don't destroy it, they fear, the Brotherhood might reemerge and seek vengeance for the many hundreds of Muslim Brothers who have been killed over the past two years—which is precisely what the Brotherhood has vowed to do. Indeed, as multiple Brotherhood leaders have told me

since the coup, the organization seeks to investigate, try, and possibly execute those who participated in the current regime's anti-Brotherhood crackdown. So for the regime's constituent power centers, the success of the anti-Brotherhood crackdown is a matter of life and death.

UNITED IN FEAR AND LOATHING

As a result of the regime's single-minded focus on the Muslim Brotherhood, Sisi has far more leeway for issuing edicts and consolidating his legal authority than Morsi ever enjoyed. Sisi's recent law empowering him to fire the heads of Egypt's four independent regulatory agencies is a case in point. Morsi's various power grabs sparked regime-ending protests, yet Sisi's maneuver passed with nary a peep.

AL YOUM AL SAABI NEWSPAPER / REUTERS

Supporters of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi react after two fellow supporters were sentenced to death during a trial in Alexandria, March 2014.

There is ample reason to doubt whether a regime whose primary objective is destroying the Brotherhood can succeed at governing. After all, a regime that spends so much political capital on locking out one organization can never be

politically inclusive. Moreover, the regime's insistence that the Muslim Brotherhood is behind every terrorist incident, including the most severe attacks for which ISIS-affiliated groups have claimed responsibility, means that it is still not viewing the threats it faces realistically. And the regime's broad crackdown in the name of counterterrorism, which has swept up activists and journalists who strongly supported Morsi's ouster, is creating new enemies and possibly sowing the seeds for more violent revolutionary upheaval down the road.

Yet for the most part, the regime's anti-Brotherhood bent is still a political winner and will likely remain so for some time. At home, many, and possibly most, Egyptians continue to view the Brotherhood as a destabilizing force, given the significant political uncertainty of Morsi's tumultuous year in power and the Brotherhood's endorsement of attacks on infrastructure. These Egyptians are not necessarily enthusiastic about Sisi, but they view his regime's internal unity as the one thing preventing the country from descending into the stateless chaos that has overtaken Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Revolutionary activists feel this stability-first mood very acutely and say that they have stopped protesting because they fear a popular backlash almost as much as they fear getting arrested. "If five people march and chant about a political issue, people will shoot you," an activist in Port Said told me during a recent trip. The Sisi regime's anti-Brotherhood position has also aligned Egypt with wealthy Persian Gulf states, which have kept Egypt afloat by donating over $20 billion since Morsi's ouster.

Still, it is worth remembering that the elite politics on which the regime's stability depends are often opaque. Few, if any, external observers knew of the divisions within the Egyptian military that culminated in Sisi's appointment as defense minister in August 2012, and nobody can know for certain whether there are similar, game-changing divisions beneath

the surface now. Yet nobody understands these risks better than the regime's constituent institutions and interests. And since they all fear that another round of regime change could mean their deaths, they will likely continue focusing on the anti-Brotherhood crackdown that unites them, rather than allowing internal rifts to escalate too far. Egypt's status quo, in other words, is durable. But should it suddenly break down, watch out: it will be a bloodbath.

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The Brotherhood Breaks Down

Will the Group Survive the Latest Blow?

Eric Trager and Marina Shalabi

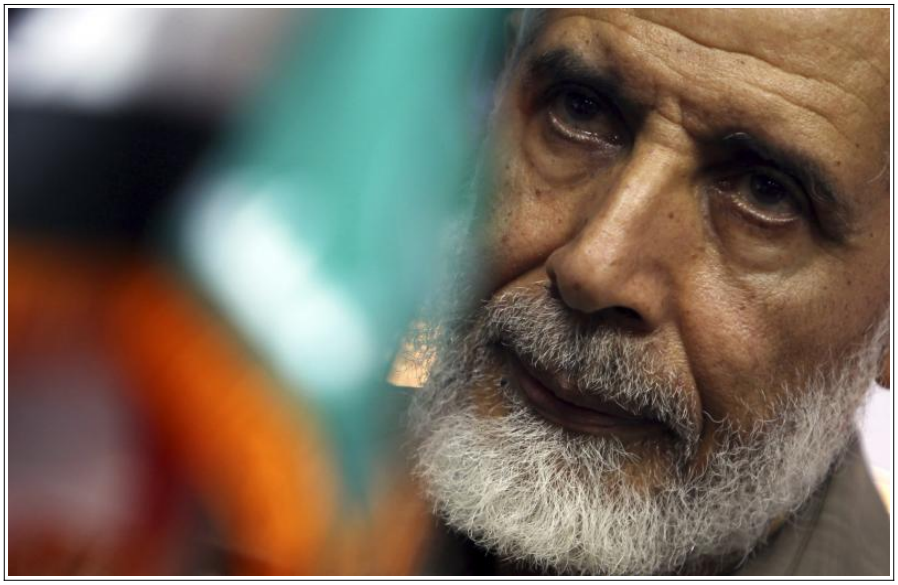
REUTERS

A man holds a poster and a sign that shows the Rabaa hand gesture, which symbolizes support for the Muslim Brotherhood, Sudan, May 22, 2015. The poster reads: "For those who facing this difficulty, be patient and endure together."

Muslim Brothers call Mahmoud Ezzat the “Iron Man.” The stoic 71-year-old deputy supreme guide earned that nickname on account of his lifelong struggle on behalf of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, including over a decade spent in Egyptian jails, during which he burnished his reputation for toughness as one of the foremost enforcers of discipline within the organization’s rigid hierarchy. Following the July

2013 ouster of Egypt's first elected president, Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, Ezzat's legend within the organization grew as he evaded the crackdown that landed most top Brotherhood leaders in prison, and then hid within Egypt even as other Muslim Brothers fled into exile. "He has the ability to hide because he was imprisoned prior to this for about ten years," Brotherhood youth activist Amr Farrag said during an October 2014 interview in Istanbul. "He can sit for something like five years without speaking to anyone, sitting in only a closed room. He can do this." Farrag added that Ezzat asked his Brotherhood colleagues not to contact him, presumably to avoid detection within Egypt.

Ezzat's strategy for self-preservation ultimately worked: Egyptian security forces did not capture him. But in his absence, the Brotherhood's internal discipline collapsed, and a severe internal rift exploded into the open in the spring of 2015. After initially attempting to resolve these divisions from within Egypt, Ezzat suddenly reappeared in Turkey in mid-November and declared himself the Brotherhood's acting supreme guide. Yet the Iron Man had lost his touch: Many Muslim Brothers rejected his power play, and the rift has deepened considerably in the past few months.



AMR ABDALLAH DALSH / REUTERS

Mahmoud Ezzat, then deputy leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, attends a news conference in Cairo, May 30, 2010.

Ezzat's failure to assert his control reflects a significant change in the organization's internal culture. For much of the past two decades, the Brotherhood was dominated by a hardline faction known as the "Qutbists"—followers of the radical Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb, whose call for global jihad later inspired al Qaeda and other terrorist movements. Like other Brotherhood leaders of his generation, Ezzat was imprisoned with Qutb prior to Qutb's execution for plotting to overthrow Gamal Abdel Nasser's government in 1966. Although Ezzat downplays the more extreme elements of Qutb's writings, he and his fellow Qutbists embrace Qutb's call for creating a "vanguard" that would "keep itself somewhat aloof" from the broader society until it can establish Islamist rule. Until the January 2011 Arab Spring uprising that ended Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year reign, the Qutbists viewed the Brotherhood's pursuit of power as a long-term goal, and worked in the interim to build an ideologically cohesive organization by recruiting only the

most dedicated followers and preparing them for power when the time was ripe. The Qutbists typically argued against political cooperation with non-Islamists, fearing that doing so would force the Brotherhood to compromise on its Islamist principles.

This insular approach put the Qutbists at odds with the Brotherhood's so-called reformists. Although the reformists shared the Qutbists' long-term aim of establishing a global Islamic state, they believed that the organization could best promote its agenda through broad-based outreach, including coordination with non-Islamist groups on shared political goals. The reformists thus led the Brotherhood's efforts to organize and win power within Egypt's professional syndicates during the 1990s, and reformist Brotherhood youths participated in opposition coalitions that included non-Islamist forces. Brotherhood reformists also spearheaded the organization's outreach to the international community, feeding the narrative of a supposedly "moderate Muslim Brotherhood" within Western academic and policy circles.

Yet the reformists always represented a small minority within the Brotherhood's leadership, and the Qutbists—often led by Ezzat—sidelined them whenever a significant disagreement emerged. For example, when young reformists attempted to establish a Brotherhood-oriented political party in 1996 against the wishes of the executive Guidance Office, they were banished from the organization. Similarly, when two prominent reformist leaders criticized a 2007 Brotherhood "platform" that called for banning non-Muslims from running for president of Egypt, they were voted out of the Guidance Office in subsequent internal elections. The Brotherhood later banished them for their continued disobedience following the 2011 uprising. And when a group of young Brotherhood cadres rejected the Guidance Office's edict commanding all Muslim Brothers to support the organization's nascent Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in March 2011, the young

cadres were soon banished as well.

> *With the Brotherhood's leaders in prison, exile, or hiding, the youth cadres suddenly gained significant influence.*

In all of these instances, the Qutbists' swift enforcement of discipline prevented internal disagreements from becoming significant fissures. Indeed, those reformists who remained within the organization fell in line, even as the Qutbists charted an increasingly aggressive political strategy in the years that followed Mubarak's overthrow. The Brotherhood thus remained tightly unified through the various elections and referenda of the 2011–12 period, in which the FJP won both parliamentary houses and Mohamed Morsi, its presidential candidate, won the presidency.
Approximately halfway through Morsi's year-long presidency, however, new tensions emerged within the Brotherhood. In November 2012, Morsi issued a constitutional declaration that gave him unchecked executive authority. He then used the ensuing crisis to rush an Islamist constitution draft to a referendum. As mass protests gathered outside the presidential palace demanding Morsi's overthrow, prominent Brotherhood youth cadres threatened an aggressive response. "When the Future of Egypt [sic] is in balance … we are more than willing to pay for it with our lives not votes," Gehad al-Haddad, the son of Morsi's foreign policy adviser, tweeted at the time. Others called for "cleansing" the nation of Morsi's critics.

> *@hahellyer @elgindy_ When Future of Egypt is in balance, we have no regrets, we are more than wiling to pay for it with our lives not votes*
>
> *— Gehad El-Haddad (@gelhaddad) November 24, 2012*

The Brotherhood's leaders initially tried to calm the group's

youth elements by directing them to demonstrate in support of Morsi at a separate location from the anti-Morsi protesters. Yet as pressure for a more direct response from below mounted, the Qutbists struggled to contain it. After all, the youths' call for confronting the anti-Morsi opposition was a direct outgrowth of the Qutbists' ideological rejection of compromise with non-Islamists, so the Guidance Office ultimately relented and mobilized its members to "protect [Morsi's] legitimacy" outside the presidential palace on December 5, 2012. It was one of the Brotherhood's most damaging decisions, catalyzing severe clashes between Muslim Brothers and anti-Morsi protesters in which ten people were killed. The Brotherhood's attack on protesters became a rallying cry for the anti-Morsi opposition, and Egypt's military finally responded to the escalating and often violent protests by removing Morsi from power on July 3, 2013. The new military-backed government then launched a severe crackdown on the Brotherhood, which effectively decapitated it.

With the Brotherhood's leaders in prison, exile, or hiding, the youth cadres suddenly gained significant influence. When the Brotherhood held new leadership elections in February 2014, it replaced 65 percent of its previous leaders, and 90 percent of the new ones came from the younger generation. In contrast to the Qutbists, who reverted to seeing the Brotherhood's struggle as a long-term one, these younger Muslim Brothers advocated a revolutionary posture to destabilize the new regime of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi as soon as possible. Under their leadership, the Brotherhood embraced "jihad" and "martyrdom" in a January 2015 statement, and touted attacks on security forces and infrastructure on its social media pages. Meanwhile, the youths sidelined the old Qutbist leaders, such as longtime Brotherhood Secretary-General Mahmoud Hussein, who managed the organization from abroad during the year

following Morsi's ouster.

AMR ABDALLAH DALSH / REUTERS

A news photographer with her mouth taped and holds up her camera during a protest against the detention of Ahmed Ramadan, a photojournalist with Egyptian private newspaper "Tahrir", in front of the Syndicate of Journalists in Cairo, Egypt August 17, 2015. Ramadan was released on bail late Monday following his arrest on Sunday on accusations that he was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, local media reported.

The Qutbists repeatedly warned the new youth leaders that this type of revolutionary violence would legitimize the regime's crackdown on the organization. When their advice was ignored, however, the Qutbists took matters into their own hands: In a May 2015 statement, Hussein attempted to reappoint himself secretary-general. The youth leadership rejected his maneuver, and news of the split spilled into the open, as Brotherhood youths launched a popular "we will not go backwards" hashtag on social media against the Qutbists' so-called soft coup. To resolve the crisis, the Brotherhood's Supreme Administrative Committee, which was established to run the organization's affairs within Egypt, announced that it would investigate the rift and punish those responsible. But in

late May and early June, the Egyptian government captured three of the Brotherhood's remaining senior leaders in a Cairo suburb, which halted the investigation.

Meanwhile, a new rift emerged between the Brotherhood's offices in London and Istanbul. The Istanbul office had been given control over the Brotherhood's activities in exile after Morsi's ouster. But its youth members' calls for violent revolution in Egypt had put pressure on the Brotherhood's office in London, which the British government was investigating. The London office therefore attempted to distance itself from Istanbul by ordering its members to cease contact with the Istanbul office. The Supreme Administrative Committee in Cairo tried to calm this new crisis by encouraging the two offices to collaborate, but the London office refused and referred the Istanbul office to Ezzat, the Iron Man, for a second investigation.

Tensions once again exploded into the open in mid-December, when the young Brotherhood spokesman Mohammed Montasser (likely an alias) called for protests in Egypt to "bring down the military" on January 25, which marks the fifth anniversary of the 2011 uprising. The Qutbists responded furiously: They accused Montasser and his fellow Brotherhood youths of violating the organization's decision-making processes, and Ezzat announced that Montasser would be replaced by another spokesman. Yet these moves only deepened the split within the organization. Although the Brotherhood's most senior leader within Egypt, Mohamed Abdel Rahman al-Morsi (no relation to the deposed president), supported the Qutbists' move and accused the youths of attempting to monopolize power within the organization, at least 16 Brotherhood provincial offices rejected the Qutbists' stance, and the Alexandria office referred Ezzat's choice for spokesman to investigation. The two factions then declared separate media portals, with the youths maintaining their control over the Brotherhood's

traditional website ikhwanonline.com, while the Qutbists established a new website, ikhwan.site.

In recent weeks, the Qatar-based preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi has attempted to mediate the crisis, and his deputy recently proposed that the Brotherhood establish new bylaws for managing the organization. But it will be difficult to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Although the split within the Brotherhood is partly generational, it also reflects severe differences regarding the organization's goals and strategy—whether it should seek power now, as the youths demand, or in the distant future, as the Qutbists believe, as well as what tools it should use to assert Islamist rule. Yet these questions are increasingly theoretical. The Egyptian government's obliteration of the organization within Egypt means that the Brotherhood has no realistic shot at power anytime soon, and its various factions thus have little incentive to reunify in pursuit of shared ambitions. To be sure, the Brotherhood's vision for establishing an Islamist state in Egypt won't evaporate, but the rigid internal discipline that defined its decision-making and mobilization is now a thing of the past. As a result, the Iron Man is now a relic.

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Did Sisi Save Egypt?

The Arab Spring at Five

Nathan Brown and Yasser El-Shimy

MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY / REUTERS

A soldier stands guard outside a school in Qalyubiyah governorate near Cairo, Egypt, November 22, 2015.

Five years ago, the leaders of Egypt's protest movement shocked themselves by successfully bringing down President Hosni Mubarak, who had been in power since before many of them were born. In those days, it was not unusual to hear talk of a new dawn for Egyptian politics and the Arab world. It is difficult to find many leaders of that movement who are so cheerful today. And their disappointment is broadly shared in academic, policy, and media circles around the world. Young and disaffected Egyptians, the story goes, revolted against a stultified regime and demanded a democratic government, a

freer society, and more economic rights. They won the battle but lost the war, as the military, initially along with the Muslim Brotherhood and later without it, gained the upper hand and defeated the revolutionaries.

But there is a very different way to tell the story of 2011. This tale is not one of high but disappointed hope, but one of threatened chaos and rescue. From the perspective of Egypt's security institutions—its military, police, and intelligence forces—the uprising threatened to bring down not only Egypt's president but its entire social and political order. Averting such an outcome was an arduous task, one that the Egyptian armed forces still see themselves as undertaking.

SCAF POWER

In January 2011, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF)—a long-standing military body that eventually led the interim government after Mubarak was ousted and before Mohamed Morsi was elected—did, in fact, share some of the protesters' grievances, including outright opposition to Mubarak's attempts to pass the presidency on to his son Gamal, a civilian, and discontent with the growing powers of the Interior Ministry in the political system. In fact, soon after the protests began, the military leaned on the aging president to remove his son and his close associates from their ruling party positions. Habib el-Adli, a Mubarak ally and powerful minister of interior, was relieved of his duties as well. Finally, as the revolt picked up momentum, the SCAF ousted Mubarak, a former air force general who had ruled Egypt for three decades.

MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY / REUTERS

Egyptians gather in Tahrir square to celebrate former Egyptian army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's victory in the presidential vote in Cairo, June 3, 2014.

Egypt’s military has traditionally seen itself as a guardian of the nation: in other words, it believed it had both a right and a duty to get rid of government figures who had become illegitimate. Despite long-standing personal and institutional ties to the president and to his constitutional order, the SCAF found a higher calling in protecting core national interests, including stemming the tide of labor strikes that had reached military-run facilities and threatened to paralyze the economy, restoring law and order in the face of rampant criminality, defending Cairo’s finances in light of a substantial drop in tourism and foreign investment revenues, and forestalling the kind of civil war that would soon break out in Libya and Syria. Egypt, the generals understood, had approximately 90 million citizens, half of whom were near the poverty line. More disturbing, they believed, was that the regional unrest bore the traces of a foreign-inspired plot to destabilize Egypt and the Middle East; they constituted the

last line of defense.

Also guiding the SCAF's decision to step in was the fact that since the 1952 coup against the monarchy, the Egyptian military had always played a prominent role in building, and at times managing, the political system. In the 1950s and 1960s, it shared responsibility for governance with the presidency and cabinet. Defeat in the 1967 war with Israel forced the generals to take a step back from day-to-day matters. But it also relieved them of responsibility for most of Egypt's problems and allowed them to maintain autonomy from civilians. It was a happy compromise not only for Egypt's rulers, who no longer had to look over their shoulders in constant fear of a coup, but also for the army. Generals could focus on defense and procurement of arms and economic lifelines, while leaving the president, who invariably hailed from within their ranks, to tend to governance and politics. In 2011, however, Mubarak proved himself an unsteady pillar on which to rely—and he was sent packing.

AHMED JADALLAH / REUTERS

Supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood's presidential candidate Mohamed Morsi

hold his picture and wave nationals flags during a rally against the delay of the Egyptian presidential results and the Supreme Council for the Armed Forces (SCAF), at Tahrir Square in Cairo, June 23, 2012.

COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIAN

In the first stage after the revolution, the SCAF hoped to play the role of guardian; it would rule the country through decrees and unilateral constitutional declarations but still maintain a civilian government that enjoyed relatively significant autonomy in health care, education, and infrastructure. More ambitiously, the SCAF worked toward introducing free elections and allowing Islamist political participation. The idea seemed to have been to create a system of "competitive authoritarianism," which the authors Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have described as pluralism without democracy. For Egypt's generals, competitive authoritarianism would have ideally produced a hung and weakened parliament, a president with a military background, and institutionalized autonomy for the SCAF. Had this effort succeeded, the military would have reasserted its authority as an aloof guardian over an internally stable and internationally accepted pseudo-democratic façade.

> *The military saw no choice but to assume the task it had wished to avoid all along: ruling and governing at the same time.*

But the generals proved unable to steer outcomes, and the strategy went awry. The parliamentary elections of 2011–12 produced a decisively Islamist parliament with the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party taking the lion's share of the seats, followed only by the more fundamentalist Salafists. Likewise, the hopes for a return to the tradition of the officer-presidentwere quickly dashed when the Brotherhood's second-choice candidate, Mohamed Morsi, edged out the retired air force general Ahmed Shafiq in a

hard-fought contest. Morsi soon moved to strip away the SCAF's legislative authority and even replace the minister of defense with the director of military intelligence, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Contrary to talks of an alliance between these erstwhile enemies, the Brotherhood had effectively launched an ill-fated attempt to tame the generals. Although in 2012 the rivalry appeared latent (and the Brotherhood acted as if it had the time and the ability to manage the relationship), the generals were already girding to reassert their primacy.
At every step along the way, in fact, the military fought back. When the parliament proved unwieldy, the Supreme Constitutional Court dissolved it—and the SCAF made sure the ruling stuck. When it became obvious that Morsi would be the next president, the SCAF issued a constitutional declaration circumscribing the powers of his office and augmenting its own. Finally, the suspicion that the Brotherhood would eventually move for civilian control over the armed forces led the security bodies to encourage protests, and the president was overthrown.

The failure to squeeze Egyptian politics into the military's box, in addition to the Muslim Brotherhood's own jarringly clumsy political touch, left the military seeing no choice but to assume the task it had wished to avoid all along: ruling and governing at the same time. Indeed, in July 2013, when Sisi declared that Morsi was no longer president, Egypt's prospects looked dim: the economy was flirting with disaster (foreign currency reserves were less than three months' worth of imports), society was deeply polarized (with the president's proponents and opponents frequently engaged in street battles), the Sinai Peninsula was rocked by terrorist attacks, and neighboring countries were imploding. To the military, the only option seemed to be to rescuing the country from catastrophic collapse by imposing order, whatever the cost.

AMR ABDALLAH DALSH / REUTERS

A news photographer with her mouth taped holds up her camera during a protest against the detention of Ahmed Ramadan, a photojournalist with Egyptian private newspaper "Tahrir," in front of the Syndicate of Journalists in Cairo, Egypt, August 17, 2015.

THE NEW MUBARAK

It is easy—and not without merit—to describe Egypt's political system today as a restoration of Mubarak-era autocracy. But that does not go far enough. Repression is now far more extensive. In that sense, the proper historical parallel might be the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egyptian president from 1956 until his death in 1970. Under the Nasserist system, only one political party was allowed, the Muslim Brotherhood was harshly repressed, and political dissent of any ideological slant was heavily policed and monitored. The press was nationalized and tightly controlled, professional associations brought to heel, and military and security officials sprinkled throughout key state positions. The Nasserist period encouraged political activity, but only to the extent that it supported the regime. Egypt's current political

system is based on a similar level of repression at the hands of a ruling army.

Yet Sisi is not presiding over a simple re-creation of Nasserism, either. There is no sole political party to marshal everybody to the beat of the same drum. There are no mass rallies to garner popular support—the regime did call Egyptians out to the streets when it faced down the Islamists in 2013, but since then it has told them to get back to work. There is no ideology such as existed in the Nasser years, only a vague nationalism that invites people to support their leaders while giving them little idea where such figures wish to lead their society.

In that sense, the current Egyptian regime bears more resemblance to the stodgy authoritarianism of southern Europe and Latin America in the mid–twentieth century than to the ebullient nationalism of the Nasser era. Politics is something to be minimized and tolerated within very narrow bounds; most important decisions should be left to specialized (and unaccountable) state institutions. In the military's view, Egypt has not met the fate of Syria or Libya, and that by itself is an accomplishment worth celebrating. Politics should and must wait.

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NATO's Victory in Libya

The Right Way to Run an Intervention

Ivo H. Daalder and James G. Stavridis

NATO's operation in Libya has rightly been hailed as a model intervention. The alliance responded rapidly to a deteriorating situation that threatened hundreds of thousands of civilians rebelling against an oppressive regime. It succeeded in protecting those civilians and, ultimately, in providing the time and space necessary for local forces to overthrow Muammar al-Qaddafi. And it did so by involving partners in the region and sharing the burden among the alliance's members.

NATO's involvement in Libya demonstrated that the alliance remains an essential source of stability. But to preserve that role, NATO must solidify the political cohesion and shared

capabilities that made the operation in Libya possible -- particularly as its leaders prepare for the upcoming NATO summit in Chicago this May.

RAPID RESPONSE

When the people of Libya rose up against Qaddafi in February 2011, many hoped that the nonviolent protests would follow the successful path of similar uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. But rather than capitulate, as had Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, Qaddafi launched a brutal crackdown.

The international community responded swiftly. In late February, the UN Security Council placed sanctions, an arms embargo, and an asset freeze on Libya and referred Qaddafi's crimes against humanity to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Shortly thereafter, the Arab League suspended Libya from its sessions and then called on the international community to impose a no-fly zone. On March 17, the Security Council granted that request, mandating "all necessary measures" to protect civilians.

The United States facilitated this rapid international reaction. In late February, Washington was the first country to cut off Qaddafi's funding, freezing $32 billion in Libyan assets and prompting other countries to follow suit. Washington also led the charge for the UN resolution that authorized the intervention, justifying the action as consistent with "the responsibility to protect," the norm that calls on the international community to intervene when governments fail to safeguard their own civilians. And on March 19, following the UN authorization, the United States led a coalition in launching air and missile strikes against Libyan forces -- including against a large concentration of armored vehicles approaching Benghazi, the headquarters of the revolution and home to 750,000 people whom Qaddafi had labeled as "rats" when he threatened to "cleanse Libya house by house." The

initial intervention rescued the people of Benghazi, obliterated Libya's air defense system within 72 hours, and deployed aircraft and naval vessels to enforce the UN resolution.

Following this early success, U.S. President Barack Obama sought NATO's agreement to take over command and control of the operation in order to ensure the effective integration of allied and partnered militaries. Washington would continue to participate in military operations but would do so mainly by gathering and analyzing intelligence, refueling NATO and partner aircraft, and contributing other high-end military capabilities, such as electronic jamming.

With many NATO countries, including Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, already contributing to the intervention, NATO was the logical choice to assume command, and it agreed to do so on March 27. Dubbed Operation Unified Protector, the alliance's mission in Libya consisted of three separate tasks: policing the arms embargo, patrolling the no-fly zone, and protecting civilians. Although it immediately solidified the maritime blockade and the no-fly zone, it encountered difficulties in protecting the Libyan people. The proximity of the regime's forces, facilities, and equipment to civilian infrastructure; the initially limited ability of the Libyan opposition to defend itself and the population centers under its control; and the need for NATO to minimize harm to civilians all slowed the operation and at times led to a perception of deadlock and stalemate.

By the middle of August, however, the opposition had gained enough strength to attack Qaddafi's strongholds, first in Tripoli and then in Sirte. Within two months, the Libyan National Transitional Council had secured control over the entire country and rebels had captured and killed Qaddafi. Operation Unified Protector ended on October 31, 222 days

after it had begun.

A TEACHABLE MOMENT

By any measure, NATO succeeded in Libya. It saved tens of thousands of lives from almost certain destruction. It conducted an air campaign of unparalleled precision, which, although not perfect, greatly minimized collateral damage. It enabled the Libyan opposition to overthrow one of the world's longest-ruling dictators. And it accomplished all of this without a single allied casualty and at a cost -- $1.1 billion for the United States and several billion dollars overall -- that was a fraction of that spent on previous interventions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

But the Libya operation had its challenges as well, both in conception and in execution. If NATO is to replicate its success in the future, it must examine and learn from these challenges.

The first lesson is that NATO is uniquely positioned to respond quickly and effectively to international crises. Some countries have significant military reach. But when a group of countries wants to launch a joint intervention as a coalition -- which confers political legitimacy -- only NATO can provide the common command structure and capabilities necessary to plan and execute complex operations. Multilateral coalitions built on an as-needed basis, by contrast, have no common doctrine for conducting military operations, no common capabilities or command structure for quickly integrating national forces into a cohesive campaign, and no standing mechanisms for debating and then deciding on an agreed course of action. Such ad hoc coalitions therefore almost always rely disproportionately on a single nation to bear the brunt of security burdens that ideally should be more equally shared.

In Libya, NATO coordinated the actions of 18 countries -- 14 member states and four partners -- under a unified command. The United States certainly played a critical role, providing intelligence, fueling, and targeting capabilities. But other states made similarly indispensable contributions. France and the United Kingdom flew over 40 percent of the sorties, together destroying more than a third of the overall targets. Italy provided aircraft for reconnaissance missions and, along with Greece, access to a large number of air bases. Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Norway, and the United Arab Emirates deployed fighters for combat operations, and Jordan, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and Qatar helped enforce the no-fly zone. Many of these states, as well as Bulgaria and Romania, also deployed naval assets to enforce the arms embargo.

The second lesson of Libya is that although NATO's political unity is improving, more work must be done. NATO allies overcame their early differences on Libya and forged a course of action acceptable to all. Every ally contributed to the operation through NATO's command structure, and no allies restricted the use of their personnel assigned to NATO command centers in places such as Mons, Belgium; Naples, Italy; or Ramstein, Germany. But although 14 member states contributed directly to Operation Unified Protector, an equal number did not. Many of the countries that did not participate lacked the resources to do so but still lent their political support. Some countries, such as Germany, however, decided not to participate even though they could have. Berlin did not block NATO's decision to act in Libya and even assisted alliance operations as a whole by increasing its involvement in aerial surveillance in Afghanistan. But it abstained from the UN Security Council vote authorizing the intervention and stayed out of the military operation. And even though Poland assisted by selling precision munitions to other NATO countries, it, too, refrained from participating directly.

Some commentators, such as Anne Applebaum, have expressed fears that the absence of a substantial number of NATO members from the mission in Libya signaled a lack of solidarity or, worse, the emergence of a two-tiered alliance, in which some members focus on humanitarian and peacekeeping missions and others bear the burden of combat.

Such a concern is misplaced -- at least for now. When NATO's work is viewed through the context of the entire span of its missions, from that in Afghanistan to antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, it becomes clear that every member state participates to the best of its abilities -- including Germany and Poland, both of which are playing significant roles in Afghanistan and Kosovo. Yet although the Libya operation showed that the allies' political commitment to NATO is improving, the allies must work to translate this political will into reality by sharing more equitably in the alliance's overall defensive burden.

The intervention in Libya also demonstrated that a politically cohesive NATO can tackle increasingly complex, and increasingly global, security challenges. For its first 40 years, NATO concentrated on defending the borders of its member states. But after the Cold War, the alliance expanded its focus beyond deterrence, making it the partner of choice for international security operations. This trend began with the Partnership for Peace in the mid-1990s, a program of practical cooperation and political dialogue with nonmember states across Europe and Central Asia. And it has continued into the current century, with 50 nations placing their forces under NATO's command as part of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

NATO again took the lead in Libya. Some countries hesitated to place NATO in charge of a military action, fearing that the alliance would not garner enough support in the region, but it turned out that Arab states preferred to work through NATO;

several of them, such as Jordan, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates, had already participated in NATO-led operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan, and others had fostered closer relations with NATO through the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. These programs, launched in 1994 and 2004, respectively, expanded NATO's ability to partner with countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

These partnerships with non-NATO members signify the increasing role of the alliance beyond its borders. Such cooperation may not have a decisive military impact; as in the Balkans and Afghanistan, alliance members supplied the bulk of the military capability in Libya. (Nearly 90 percent of the non-U.S. forces in Afghanistan, for example, come from countries in Europe.) But this kind of burden sharing is politically essential to the overall effectiveness of NATO's operations. The participation of Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates and their support for Libyan opposition forces proved critical to the liberation of Tripoli, both by demonstrating Arab political support and by providing additional military capabilities. Regional participation also helped allay potential friction within the alliance, reassuring many otherwise reluctant NATO members of the mission's legitimacy.

IT GETS BETTER

However successful, NATO's intervention in Libya suggested that the organization must strengthen its basic infrastructure if it hopes to increase its role in global security. NATO's integrated command structure and shared funding bind the alliance together, but serious gaps remain in its overall capabilities. Within the command structure, for example, the alliance has failed to devote the necessary resources to developing key skills, including the capacity to find and engage the types of mobile targets common in contemporary

operations, plan joint operations in parallel with fast-paced political decision-making, support the targeting process with legal advice, and provide timely and reliable information on operational developments to the public. NATO has also neglected to cultivate essential tools for military campaigns, such as intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, precision targeting, and aerial refueling -- despite nearly two decades of experience that have demonstrated their value.

Instead of investing in NATO, many member states have depended on the United States to compensate for these deficiencies. In Libya, Washington provided 75 percent of the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance data employed to protect Libyan civilians and enforce the arms embargo. It also contributed 75 percent of the refueling planes used throughout the mission -- without which strike aircraft could not have lingered near potential targets in order to respond quickly to hostile forces threatening to attack civilians. And U.S. commanders in Europe had to quickly dispatch over 100 military personnel to the NATO targeting center at the outset of the intervention when it became clear that other member states lacked the knowledge and expertise to provide their aircraft with the correct targeting information.

The heavy reliance of alliance members on the United States during the conflict highlighted the cost of a decade of European underinvestment in defense. On average, U.S. allies in Europe now spend just 1.6 percent of their GDPs on their militaries, and many spend less than one percent; the United States, in contrast, spends over four percent of its GDP. The fact that Washington spends nearly three times as much on defense as the other 27 NATO allies combined has opened a growing divide in the capabilities of the member states. As former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned in his valedictory policy address last June, this imbalance threatens to create a two-tiered alliance that will ultimately prove unsustainable.

NATO began to address these shortfalls before the war in Libya began. At the Lisbon summit in November 2010, for example, the alliance adopted a new "strategic concept" to guide it for the next decade. In it, the allies committed to deploying the "full range of capabilities necessary to deter and defend against any threat to the safety and security of [its] populations." It also identified and prioritized the ten capabilities that member states agreed were essential to the organization's strength not only in today's operations (such as enhanced methods to counter improvised explosive devices and improvements in information sharing) but also in the future (such as missile defense and joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance -- a key deficiency in Libya).

The alliance will now have to summon the political will to implement these standards in a period of fiscal austerity. NATO countries can continue to invest in their military capabilities on their own -- which means investing inefficiently and often insufficiently, while leaning on an increasingly impatient United States to make up the difference. Or member states can invest through NATO and other multinational programs, saving money, promoting cooperation, sharing capabilities, and demonstrating solidarity. NATO will continue to succeed only if every member state chooses the latter course.

Should NATO members rise to the challenge, their investments will fund vital programs that can address some of the shortfalls of the Libya operation. One such program is the Alliance Ground Surveillance system, which is designed to help locate mobile and concealed ground forces and will thereby strengthen NATO's intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations. Members should also consider pooling their investments in aerial refueling and precision-guided weapons and sharing data on their own national munitions stockpiles in order to improve planning.

The allies must also remember that the operation in Libya was relatively small -- about one-fifth the size of that in Kosovo in terms of the number of military assets involved. If defense spending continues to decline, NATO may not be able to replicate its success in Libya in another decade. NATO members must therefore use the Chicago summit to strengthen the alliance by ensuring that the burden sharing that worked so well in Libya -- and continues in Afghanistan today -- becomes the rule, not the exception.

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Libya's Militia Menace

The Challenge After the Elections

Frederic Wehrey

By any standard, Libya's July 7 elections were a remarkable achievement. They defied expectations of widespread violence and an Islamist landslide. The victorious Mahmoud Jibril, head of the National Forces Alliance, has already made signs of reaching out to rival political factions across the country, most notably the federalists in the east. Headlines around the world proclaimed the country's first free vote in six decades a success.

Even so, observers should have no illusions about the momentous challenges ahead -- especially that of rebuilding and formalizing the country's security services. In the absence of an effective police force and army, the country's

transitional government has pursued a contradictory policy. On the one hand, recognizing that armed militias could destabilize the state, it has enacted some programs to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate the country's countless revolutionary "brigades."

At the same time, however, the transitional government has been forced to harness the militias' power to project its own authority, because the existing police and army are weak and are associated with the old regime. In the transition period, governing officials co-opted and deputized militia commanders to quell tribal fighting in the western Nafusa Mountains and the Saharan towns of Kufra and Sabha. During the elections, they employed other armed groups to provide security; in Benghazi, for example, the ballots were stored and counted at the headquarters of the city's strongest militia. To a degree, the Libyan Ministry of Defense even subcontracted border control and the defense of the country's oil installations and fields to small brigades.

The strategy of trying to dismantle the regional militias while simultaneously making use of them as hired guns might be sowing the seeds for the country's descent into warlordism. It has also given local brigades and their political patrons leverage over the central government. Emboldened by the writ of state authority, brigade commanders have been free to carry out vendettas against rival towns and tribes, particularly those favored by former leader Muammar al-Qaddafi.

Just after the election, for example, a major standoff erupted between Misrata -- a city-state that hosts the country's most organized brigades -- and Bani Walid -- a loyalist enclave whose major tribe, the al-Warfalla, has long incurred the ire of Misrata's merchant families. On July 8, two Misratan journalists were detained in Bani Walid. Misratan militias reportedly converged on the town's outskirts, threatening to

attack. The militia commanders claimed that they were acting in the name of the transitional government, which the Chief of Staff quickly repudiated. The conflict quickly escalated when Imazighen (Berber) forces from the Nafusa Mountains and militias from Souq al-Jumaa -- each nursing their own grievances against Bani Walid -- arrived to join the Misratans. Meanwhile, tribal elders from across the country worked frantically to secure the journalists. The standoff finally ended late Sunday when the Misratans agreed to release detainees from Bani Walid whom they had incarcerated in militia-run prisons in exchange for release of the journalists.

All of this points to a government that has ceded an unhealthy degree of authority to local militias and tribal intermediaries. So the Jibril administration's first order of business will be to right the security sector and bolster the judiciary quickly. Much of its work will should focus on dismantling or institutionalizing two ad-hoc security bodies that the transitional government created or tolerated: the Supreme Security Committees (SSC), which fall under the Ministry of Interior, and the Libyan Shield Forces, which are nominally attached to the Ministry of Defense. These bodies were intended to provide security in the transitional period by harnessing the zeal and expertise of the revolutionary fighters, but they have rapidly become a force unto themselves. They have become more formalized and have preserved the structures of local militias. They also overshadow the regular police and the national army, who remain weak, ill-equipped, and tainted by their affiliation with the Qaddafi regime.

Between these two bodies, the more problematic is the SSC. The force is estimated to consist of 90,000 to 100,000 fighters. These men, ostensibly revolutionaries, have acted act as a sort of national gendarmerie, providing transitional security at the local level, particularly during the election period. But ominously, the SCC has not managed to break

down the fighters' old allegiances: entire brigades have joined en masse and their commanders have simply switched hats. This is particularly the case in Derna, a longtime hub of Salafi militancy. Here, a local Salafi brigade, the Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade, which is known for its vendettas against Qaddafi-era security officials and its ties to more radical Salafi groups like the Ansar al-Sharia, is now enforcing security as the town's branch of the SSC. Among some Libyans, the incorporation of the Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade into the SSC represented a victory: the integration of a troublesome band of fighters into the orbit of the state. But such views are naive: the relationship between the government and local SSC-incorporated brigades will hold only as long as interests overlap.

The SSC system and the transitional government's demobilization programs work at cross-purposes. Pay for fighters who join an SSC-incorporated brigade is higher than what most Libyans could hope to make on the outside, so fighters have little incentive to leave and recruits have reportedly flocked to join. Many Libyans have feared the SSC as unruly thugs, who are distinguished only by hastily made logos on their T-shirts. Increasingly, though, there are signs that the SSC is becoming a more formalized unit -- the uniforms have gotten better and the SSC now has a Web site. In other words, it looks like the SSCs are not going away anytime soon.

The Libyan Shield Force, meanwhile, is a coalition of militias from the east, Misrata, and Zintan that acts in parallel with Libya's national army. In many respects, the Shield Force is a bottom-up initiative by brigade commanders themselves, designed to resist the incorporation of their fighters into the official army or police departments and to preserve the structure of the brigades -- albeit under a different, more official-sounding name. The Shield supposedly acts under orders of the Ministry of Defense to quell tribal and ethnic

fighting in Kufra, Sabha, and Zintan. In many instances, however, it has ended up inflaming tensions in these areas, either through heavy-handedness, such as its indiscriminate shelling of Kufra and its forced evictions of ethnic Tabu that city in April. In other cases, locals see the Shield's commanders being party to the conflict because of their tribal affiliation.

One Misrata brigade commander, arguably the most powerful militia leader in the city, plans to transform the Shield into Libya's reserve military force, which would operate alongside the country's army, navy, and air force, and would be directly run by the administration's chief of staff. Under the plan, Shield members would train one month a year and receive a stipend and medical benefits for themselves and their families. In exchange, they would hand over their heavy weaponry -- artillery, tanks, rockets, recoilless rifles -- to the Ministry of Defense. The government would buy back the fighters' medium-sized weaponry -- the 14.5- and 23-millimeter anti-aircraft guns that were staples of the revolution. All these weapons would be stored in regional military zones, overseen by local Shield commanders.

The scheme is purportedly intended to break up the brigades, since recruits join as individuals, not as part of a group. It is hard not to imagine, however, that it is just an ingenious way of preserving the prerogatives of the regional brigades and positioning the Shield as a hedge against an unfavorable political situation in Tripoli. The fact that the reserve plan originated in Misrata is not surprising, given the town's go-it-alone reputation, powerful militias, and claim to the mantle of the revolution. A senior Misratan commander noted as much, telling me, "Misrata will start this initiative and we are confident other cities will follow." The much-applauded victory of Jibril's National Forces Alliance is only going to strengthen Misrata's resolve against integration. The alliance did poorly in Misrata and Jibril's Warfalla tribe is despised by

the city's powerful families.

What then of the government's plans to institutionalize the brigades and bolster the official security sector? At the forefront of this task is an initiative from the prime minister's office called the Warrior's Affairs Commission (WAC), which has conducted an exhaustive registration and data collection of nearly 215,000 revolutionary fighters. It also functions as a sort of placement service, moving these young men into the police and the army, sending them on scholarships abroad, furthering their education at home, or giving them vocational training. After being vetted and screened, roughly 150,000 men are now eligible for placement; what happens to the other 65,000 remains to be seen.

The implied goal of the WAC is to break up the brigades by appealing to individual interest: "We need to appeal to the revolutionaries' ambitions and desire for a better life. We need to tell him that the brigades cannot offer you anything." Unsurprisingly, the reaction from brigades has been tepid. Misratan brigade commanders believe that the WAC is either unwittingly or knowingly recruiting loyalist soldiers and that it has been slow to register its fighters. The commander of a powerful Zintani brigade, which is based in Tripoli but has forces guarding southern borders and oil installations, dismissed the WAC as an "academic" exercise that will face difficulty being implemented.

At one level, the system of militia co-option has worked -- low level violence has been confined to peripheral conflicts in the west and south and the elections went off relatively smoothly. But questions remain about its durability and eventual cost to the development of state institutions. Moving forward, the next government should adopt a dual-track approach of building up the national army and police, focusing especially on training a newer generation of junior and mid-level officers, while downsizing the bloated senior ranks. It should

bolster the demobilization and integration programs that aim to give young fighters educational and vocational opportunities, weaning them away from the embrace of the brigades. Most importantly, though, the government should address the root causes of local tribal and ethnic flare-ups, and militancy in the east. After all, policing these conflicts gives the militia coalitions much of their leverage over the government.

On this issue, the government should focus on Libya's justice system. In many respects, the ongoing conflicts in Zintan, Kufra, and Sabha are symptomatic of its absence. A relatively limited offense -- a land dispute, theft, or murder -- can quickly escalate because there are no courts, but there are plenty of guns. For its part, the transitional government tried to fill the gaps by deploying a network of tribal elders, business elites, and religious intermediaries to broker ceasefires. A key figure on this front has been the Grand Mufti Sheikh Sadiq al-Ghiryani, who mediated among radical Salafist groups in the east after the desecration of World War II graves and Sufi shrines.

But there are limits to how far mediators can push, given their local roots and affiliations. This is particularly true for Ghiryani, who is a Salafi and has adopted an ambivalent attitude toward attacks on Sufi sites. Most recently, he rejected Jibril's National Forces Alliance, issuing a fatwa against it on the grounds that it was un-Islamic.

Then the new government will need to turn to the jails. The presence of brigade-run prisons is problematic. Reports of torture inflame local conflicts. And the current standoff between Misrata and Bani Walid is at least partly rooted in Misrata's prolonged incarceration of Bani Walid fighters. The government decreed that by July 12, the local brigades should either free their prisoners or transfer them to the custody of the state, but progress has been slow and uneven. As of this

writing, an estimated 5,000 prisoners still remain in militia-run prisons, while 3,000 have been transferred to the Ministry of Justice.

Many observers have attributed the Libyan transitional government's impotence on the security and judicial fronts to its temporariness and its lack of legitimacy. If that theory is correct, the successor administration must act swiftly and decisively -- or, like the sorcerer's apprentice, find itself confronted with forces that it cannot control.

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After Qaddafi

The Surprising Success of the New Libya

Dirk Vandewalle

ASMAA WAGUIH / REUTERS

An anti-Gaddafi rebel prays and chants along a road during clashes with pro-Qaddafi forces near Ras Lanuf March 8, 2011. Libyan government forces attacked rebels with rockets, tanks and warplanes on western and eastern fronts, intensifying their offensive to crush the revolt against Muammar Gaddafi.

The September 11 killing of the U.S. ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and three other Americans during an attack by an angry mob on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi has concentrated the world's attention on the problems of post-Qaddafi Libya. The riots showcased both the power of radical Islamist militias and the inability of the government in Tripoli to provide security and maintain order across the country. Lawlessness and corruption are pervasive, and fundamental

questions about the structure and operation of Libyan political and economic institutions remain unanswered. None of this, however, should obscure the fact that the larger story about the new Libya is surprisingly positive. The worst-case scenarios commonly predicted a year ago have not emerged, and there are actually grounds for guarded optimism about the future.

A year and a half ago, Libya seemed as though it would be the country where the Arab Spring came to an end. After popular uprisings peacefully unseated dictators in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt, the Libyan revolution turned into a protracted, bloody civil war. Even when the rebels, with Western assistance, finally toppled the regime of Muammar al-Qaddafi in August 2011, many obstacles lay ahead. Libyans had little sense of national identity and no experience with democracy. The country was led by a transitional government that did not have a monopoly on the use of force. To build a functional state, Libya would have to overcome the legacy of over four decades of dictatorial rule, during which Qaddafi had prevented the development of real national institutions.

Now, however, defying expectations, Libya stands out as one of the most successful countries to emerge from the uprisings that have rocked the Arab world over the past two years. On July 7, with little fanfare but great determination, Libya held its first national elections since Qaddafi's fall, in which the country's citizens peacefully voted in the new 200-member General National Congress. A month later, the National Transitional Council, which had emerged as the opposition's political leadership during the early days of the civil war, formally transferred its powers to the General National Congress. A commission will now draft the country's constitution, which will be put before the people in a popular referendum. All these developments have followed the schedule that the NTC outlined in the depths of the war. Great difficulties lie ahead, but the unexpected smoothness of

Libya's political transition thus far represents a singular achievement for a country still reeling from decades of dictatorship.

What explains Libya's relative success? Many scholars saw the country's lack of institutional development as a bad sign for its future as a democracy. Yet the past year seems to suggest that Libya has actually benefited from having to virtually start from scratch in building a functioning state. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, where deeply entrenched institutions, such as the military and powerful bureaucracies, have proved so resistant to reform, Tripoli's new leaders have not needed to dismantle large institutional remnants of the old order.

Libya's recent accomplishments mark only the beginning of what promises to be a long and difficult process of repairing a war-torn country. But if the July elections are any indication, most Libyans are determined to build a political community that respects differences of opinion and resolves disputes through democratic processes -- something they have never before enjoyed.

TAKE THE BAD WITH THE GOOD

Following Qaddafi's fall, few observers predicted that Libya, with its troubled history, would emerge as a successful state. The Libyan monarchy, which ruled from 1951 to 1969, did little to smooth over the mutual suspicions that still divide Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan, the country's three historical provinces, which formed the kingdom of Libya. King Idris also failed to create any national institutions beyond the most basic machinery of a modern state, as hefty oil wealth came to dominate the country's economy and politics. When Qaddafi ousted Idris in 1969, he consolidated power and eviscerated the few national institutions, such as the country's weak army, that the kingdom had managed to

nurture.

During the recent civil war, events such as the July 2011 assassination of one of the rebels' main military commanders, Abdul Fattah Younes, by an anti-Qaddafi militia, and the resulting chaos within the opposition, seemed to demonstrate that the NTC would also prove incapable of mending these historical fractures. Even after the rebels' victory, scores of powerful militias -- some consisting of genuine revolutionary fighters, others simply of armed thugs -- threatened the transitional government's control over the country. So pervasive was the pessimism about Libya's future that a number of international and local media outlets, including the Libya Herald, the country's flagship English-language newspaper, regularly suggested that Libya would become the world's next failed state, torn asunder by its tribal and regional rivalries and corrupted by both oil money and the same divide-and-rule politics that had kept the previous regime entrenched for over four decades.

Although Libya has not imploded, lawlessness -- as Stevens' killing suggests -- and corruption persist. Thuwar (revolutionaries) are still taking the law into their own hands. Members of rogue militias have tortured and abused detainees they arrested during the civil war. The cities are still plagued by banditry and Mafia-like protection schemes. In the southern part of the country, local Libyan tribes are fighting against Tubu groups over control of the lucrative cross-border trafficking of goods, which the government seems unable to contain. Alarmingly, much of this smuggling involves weapons, including heat-seeking missiles and rocket-propelled grenades, looted from Qaddafi-era depots.

Perhaps most worrisome, the government has taken too few steps toward ensuring transitional justice and reconciliation, an issue that was barely part of the political debate leading up to the July elections. Thousands of suspected Qaddafi

loyalists and innocent people, citizens and noncitizens alike, still sit in jails controlled not by the government but by militias or local security groups. Many of their members seem to care more about settling personal scores than meting out justice. In particular, the displacement and mistreatment of the Tawerghans, a minority group that was expelled from its hometown near Misratah on charges of having committed atrocities at the behest of the Qaddafi regime, stands out as a black mark against the new government.

A closer look at what Libya has accomplished, however, yields a more optimistic picture. The NTC's ability to organize national elections and its willingness to hand over power to an elected national congress in August indicate that Libya has started to construct meaningful political institutions. The elections may not have been perfect in every respect; in the eastern part of the country, there were reports that some ballot boxes had been destroyed. But they were still met with the widespread approval of approximately 27,000 local and international observers. Ultimately, the elections promise to boost the public's confidence in their current leaders, providing the new government with the popular legitimacy that its predecessor lacked.

Slowly but surely, Libya is becoming a more integrated country with a national government able to act effectively. Libya's central authorities have expanded their power at the expense of many of the militias that still dispute Tripoli's control over the country. All of Libya's schools have reopened. Retail business is flourishing as never before; after months of inactivity, Tripoli's souk is once again full of vendors until late in the evening. The new government has begun to reorganize the bureaucracy, which continues to operate even as it struggles to move beyond the mess left by Qaddafi. Courts have started to function more independently; in June, for example, the Supreme Court overturned a landmark law passed by the NTC that seemed aimed at muzzling free

expression. Meanwhile, hundreds of new civil-society organizations and media outlets have sprung up. Having been denied a voice for 42 years, Libya's citizens are now claiming, and exercising, their rights to organize and express themselves.

Most important, perhaps, is the fact that Libyans now seem to share the conviction that their country is free and, despite all its internal disagreements, indivisible. Even though the supporters of federalism in Cyrenaica continue to push for a degree of autonomy and other groups are arguing for special privileges, their campaigns show no signs of tearing the country apart. The federalist movement in Cyrenaica, now consolidated around a political party, has attracted few supporters and is fragmenting as time passes. And the need to market the country's oil through an integrated physical infrastructure and unified bureaucratic management has, as in the past, tied Libya closer together.

Meanwhile, the power of the country's militias is slowly eroding. Some armed groups have been integrated into national institutions, such as the police and the army, or trained for civilian jobs. According to unofficial estimates in the Libyan media, roughly 250,000 more people will be trained within the next year. Libya's new leaders realize that bringing the militias under control will be a drawn-out process that, for the foreseeable future, will rely on government payoffs as much as on persuasion. As the government doles out financial incentives to the militias, it will need to walk a fine line, ensuring that temporary handouts do not turn into permanent entitlements. Only then can it avoid the kind of patronage politics that became an ingrained feature of life during the Qaddafi years and created entrenched special interests.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE ELECTING

To solidify its gains, and despite the government's still-limited capabilities, Libya must quickly move to further develop its nascent security, political, and economic institutions. As the July elections demonstrated, the country's political system has plenty of growing to do. Parties struggled to articulate coherent platforms and so came to be defined by individuals rather than ideas. The public seemed to have only a rudimentary understanding of the country's political processes and procedures.

None of these shortcomings were helped by an electoral system that was deliberately designed to ensure that no political group would dominate. Out of the 200 seats in the General National Congress, 80 were filled by proportional representation according to each party's share of the vote, and the rest were given to individuals who won direct elections. In addition, the party candidates, who filled the 80 proportional seats, were elected by a single nontransferable voting system, which tends to favor individual candidates at the expense of party development and coherence. In theory, the presence of a large number of independent legislators could necessitate compromise and the formation of coalitions in the new body. But in light of Libya's history of factionalism, such a system might lead only to gridlock.

In the party vote, the National Forces Alliance, led by the former NTC leader Mahmoud Jibril, routed the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Justice and Development Party. Jibril's prominence, earned during the civil war, gave his coalition a much higher level of visibility, which translated into ready votes. A number of Western commentators quickly began celebrating the defeat of Libya's Islamists by Jibril's allegedly secular coalition. But such celebrations are premature. The truth is that all of Libya's political parties, including Jibril's, maintain Islam as part of their political programs; they differ only on what precise role they assign religion in everyday life. The Justice and Development Party's weak performance,

moreover, had less to do with ideology than with the fact that Qaddafi had effectively eradicated the Brotherhood in Libya, leaving it with few organizational resources in the wake of the civil war.

In future elections, as memories of the NTC and its leaders start to fade and as the Justice and Development Party and other Islamist parties organize themselves better and develop more sophisticated and detailed platforms, Islamists will likely gain ground in Libyan politics. That said, most Libyans seem dedicated to preventing any single party or political movement from dominating their newly democratic government.

The larger challenge for Libya will be fostering a true political community. Unlike in much of the West, where countries with cogent national identities developed into electoral democracies, Libya will have to construct a national identity out of its newly formed democracy. Central to this effort will be the writing of a constitution, a social contract that can turn the unspecified and informal politics of the Qaddafi period into explicit rules. In the coming months, Libya's constitutional committee, whose members hail equally from the country's three historical provinces, will need to create an institutional design that entices Libya's diverse groups to buy into a truly national project.

A WELL-OILED MACHINE

Libya's new leaders must also find better ways to manage the country's oil resources and its economy. Qaddafi was able to perpetuate his rule by abusing these resources and creating a highly centralized but virtually unregulated economy that now suffers from all the consequences of long-term neglect: a lack of entrepreneurship; a bloated public sector that served as the employer of first and last resort and at one time employed up to 80 percent of the active labor force; weak health-care

and educational systems; unaddressed environmental problems; and decaying infrastructure, from government-owned housing to roads and oil pipelines.

Libya's economy is also not adequately diversified, and its oil sector cannot begin to create enough jobs to put the country's many unemployed and underemployed youth to work. On paper, the country's short-term economic numbers look good. Oil production has returned, more or less, to where it stood before the civil war, and officials at the National Oil Corporation project that Libya will produce an additional one million barrels per day within two years. According to a report by Business Monitor International, Libya's real GDP is expected to have risen by approximately 59 percent in 2012, after a roughly 49 percent drop in 2011. But these encouraging projections hide the fact that without major economic reforms, Libya will not be able to move beyond its status as a rentier state.

Jump-starting and diversifying the economy will require Tripoli to both promote entrepreneurship through government programs and reverse the effects of decades of oil-based patronage politics. These effects include widespread corruption and a young population with a strong sense of entitlement and a weak work ethic. To tackle these problems, ironically, Libya's new leaders must forcefully intervene in the market now to reduce the state's presence in economic affairs over the long run. The experiences of other oil-rich countries that have emerged from civil wars, such as Nigeria, demonstrate that unless patterns of patronage are forcefully stamped out early on, they soon reassert themselves. Old elites tend to reconsolidate their power. These patterns can be avoided only by increasing transparency and good governance and by expanding the population's access to the economy.

Fortunately, Libyan policymakers understand the need to

move away from the country's previous unproductive development model and to more efficiently manage oil revenues. Even during the civil war, the Dubai-based Libya Stabilization Team, which served as a sort of think tank for the rebellion's leadership, focused on smarter economic planning. And the subject continues to drive Libya's interactions with international financial institutions. Because oil revenues can be easily diverted and used for patronage, however, the government will need to keep a firm hand on the tiller.

A STATE IS BORN

Building a state and fostering a national identity take time and good leadership -- bold ideas, initiative, and the willingness to compromise. This especially holds true in Libya, where none of those qualities were much in demand during the past four decades. Perhaps because elite cliques and self-serving strongmen dominated Arab politics for so long, academic and policy circles in the West have tended to disregard the importance of good leadership in the region. Here, too, Libya has proved to be a pleasant exception and surprise.

To be sure, in the months leading up to the elections, the NTC largely failed to pass meaningful legislation and implemented somewhat arbitrary decisions. Law 36, for example, which targeted the assets of individuals with ties to Qaddafi, was a rushed, politically expedient measure that eventually had to be amended. At the August transfer of power to the General National Congress, the head of the NTC, Mustafa Abdel Jalil, admitted some of his failures, particularly in restoring security to the country. But he also pointed out that the country's interim authority had governed in "exceptional times." And for that reason, many Libyans, even those who have publicly disagreed with the NTC, share a measure of respect for what its members have accomplished.

The tasks ahead for the Libyan government are as daunting as they are numerous: providing security and order, balancing central and regional power, expanding and strengthening the rule of law, providing for transitional justice, strengthening human rights, and fostering a sense of national identity among all Libyans. In tackling these challenges, Libya will undoubtedly experience setbacks, when even the most optimistic will question what progress has been made. The recent attacks by Islamist groups on Sufi shrines, for example, have demonstrated how profound religious differences in Libya will continue to hamper the creation of a harmonious political community. But the larger picture of the transition should still inspire hope. Just a year after the fall of a dictatorship that deprived Libyans of any political role, a modern state has, against all odds, started to emerge.

If this progress continues to take root, resulting in solid institutions, Libya may well prove to be an important exception to the so-called resource curse: the seemingly immutable rule that oil-exporting countries are bound for authoritarianism and stagnation. What is more, Libya may also demonstrate the value of starting from scratch when rebuilding a war-torn country. No one could have predicted that out of the bleak ruins of the Qaddafi regime and a bloody civil war, Libya would be able to design an effective and inclusive government -- and yet most signs indicate that it is doing so. Libya's leaders have been offered a chance that few successful revolutionaries get: to start anew, with ample financial resources and the freedom to build a state as they see fit.

As the new Libya emerges, the West must continue to play a crucial supporting role, much as it did during the civil war. Stevens' death should not deter the United States from working closely with Tripoli, for the ambassador himself understood that only U.S. engagement can provide the expertise and support Libya needs to solidify its young

democracy.

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Libya on the Brink

How to Stop the Fighting

Jason Pack

HANI AMARA / COURTESY REUTERS

Wreckage at Tripoli International Airport, July 2014.

Tripoli is burning. Western Libya's two biggest militias -- Islamist-leaning fighters from the coastal city of Misrata and anti-Islamist ones from the western town of Zintan -- are facing off for the first time since they collaborated to oust Muammar al-Qaddafi three years ago. The Libyan army is nowhere to be seen, while the country's prime minister, Abdullah al-Thinni, has done little more than plead for UN "trainers," presumably shorthand for peacekeepers. In retaliation, Islamist fighters have thwarted his attempts to flee Tripoli.

What began two weeks ago as localized clashes between rogue brigades for control of Tripoli International Airport has quickly morphed into an all-out battle for control of the entire capital. Since then, the violence has rippled outward, setting the stage for a countrywide showdown between the anti-Islamist and Islamist blocs. Benghazi is now suffering the worst of the violence; jihadists there are recalling seasoned fighters from Syria while the anti-Islamist paramilitary commander Khalifa Haftar is rallying his various allies to counter them. Meanwhile, behind closed doors, Western officials are beginning to contemplate a limited military intervention.

Less than a month ago, things were looking up. In June, the country elected an anti-Islamist majority to the country's new House of Representatives -- a body that seemed likely to avoid the dysfunctional brinksmanship that had characterized its predecessor, the General National Congress. In Libya's east, Haftar's anti-Islamist coalition had started to make significant gains. Oil production was poised to increase, as the so-called Federalist movement -- which had been blockading the key oil ports and demanding regional autonomy in the eastern part of the country -- handed over control of the main oil terminals without a shot being fired. All these developments were tipping the balance of power toward the central government and away from the Islamists. Unsurprisingly, Misratan and Islamist militias chose to act as spoilers.

Their top target was Tripoli International Airport, which Zintani brigades have controlled since the fall of Qaddafi in 2011 and have transformed into a hub for their lucrative smuggling network. Although traffickers typically smuggle subsidized oil and illicit drugs by land, they transport the most lucrative commodities -- gold, hard currency, and former Qaddafi loyalists -- by air.

"Everybody knows all the main borders in the west are

controlled by Zintanis -- the smuggling doesn't even have to be hidden, as the Zintanis also control all the relevant ministries," a wealthy smuggler, who operates out of Libya's southern border, told me last week. The Misratans have grown tired of this state of affairs. They far outnumber the Zintanis, and have long sought to usurp the latter group's control over the black market. After their Islamist allies' poor showing in the parliamentary elections, the Misratans demanded that the Zintanis cede the airport; in exchange, they offered to recognize the election results.

On July 12, the two groups forged an agreement for a peaceful handoff of the airport to a neutral body. Yet the next morning, Salahuddin Badi, a Misratan militia leader and congressman, violated the agreement, seeking to retake Tripoli airport by force. According to Mohamed Eljarh, a fellow of the Rafiq Hariri Center, "Badi hoped to capitalize on a leadership vacuum in Misratan local politics to establish himself as a leader of the warmongering faction." Presumably, he also hoped to enrich himself. And although he failed militarily, he managed to drag the Misratans' biggest militias, the Central Libya Shield Force and the Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room, into the morass. So far, the better-organized Zintanis have held their positions. The Misratans, however, are regrouping.

The bulk of the fighting has remained confined to the airport and its main access roads. If the Misratans win these assets, they will be able to control Tripoli. The Zintanis' stranglehold on the so-called airport road currently allows their brigades to travel from their mountain bases to downtown Tripoli without having to pass through Misratan checkpoints. Losing control of that route would thus deny the Zintainis unfettered access to central Tripoli, forcing them to retreat back to their distant mountain redoubts. Misratan and Islamist forces could then dominate Tripoli and take over crucial government ministries currently under Zintani control. The al-Thinni

government would most likely collapse or seek refuge in Libya’s east.

Yet such an outcome still seems far off, as neither side appears strong enough to score a decisive victory. And the longer the war drags on, the greater the collateral damage will be. Tripoli Airport has already sustained billions of dollars’ worth of devastation and will not be functional in the foreseeable future. That suits the Misratans just fine, as Islamist-aligned brigades have cornered western Libya’s two other operational airports -- Misrata International and Maitiga, a former U.S. airbase.

What might appear to be an ideological struggle, then, is largely an economic competition between two rival criminal networks. The political implications are byproducts. According to Hassan, a bureaucrat and Tripoli resident I spoke to recently, “both the Zintanis and the Misratans are an illegitimate presence in the city. The populace just wanted to enjoy Ramadan with their families. This current conflict is about wealth and power -- nothing more. It has no real ideological backdrop, and the only people who pick sides are those who will benefit financially from the success of one of the groups.”

In Libya, as in so many other parts of the world, oil wealth drives conflict. And with so much money sloshing around, there are no good guys and bad guys -- no such thing as corrupt politicians and clean ones. The anti-Islamist groups are just as involved in illicit trafficking as Islamist groups. And the Zintanis have shelled as many civilian neighborhoods as the Misratans.

Due to this complicated reality, it will be difficult for any kind of foreign intervention to avoid the appearance of helping one bloc gain the upper hand over another. But given that Libya is facing the prospect of complete state collapse and a full-scale

militia war -- and that unlike in 2011, most Libyans do not fully support a single camp -- foreign powers must take pains to present themselves as impartial mediators.

The United Kingdom’s special envoy to Libya, Jonathan Powell, a former aide to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, should work with the United Nations to take the lead in coordinating the international response. Although many of the key players have appointed envoys, only London’s is a professional mediator with the requisite political backing to facilitate a grand bargain between the country’s competing factions. Libya remains a top foreign policy issue for British Prime Minister David Cameron, and the United Kingdom’s overt policy of talking with the Federalist, Islamist, and anti-Islamist factions gives them the requisite credibility to serve as a neutral mediator.

The United States, by contrast, has been too close to the anti-Islamist faction and remains hampered by domestic political concerns at home, particularly the political fallout from the 2012 terrorist attack on the U.S. special mission in Benghazi. On Saturday, Washington executed a disgraceful Saigon-style evacuation of its embassy personnel in Tripoli, marking an unambiguous victory for Libya’s jihadists. The more resolute British pulled out only nonessential personnel, and despite an attack on their withdrawing convoy, have remained committed to keeping their presence on the ground. London has thus become Washington’s eyes and ears in Libya. The United States should back British mediation efforts to the hilt.

Both the United States and the United Kingdom have critical roles to play in bringing an end to the violence. In the near term, they should combine their diplomatic clout to focus international attention on saving the country by pulling together an international summit that includes all of Libya’s key militia leaders and political factions. Domestic Libyan attempts at making peace, whether through tribal elders or

local councils, have failed to bridge the gaps between the adversaries. A concerted international mediation effort -- similar to the Northern Ireland peace process during the 1990s -- thus represents Libya's best hope. Such a negotiation might conceivably benefit from UN peacekeepers to enforce a cease-fire between the Zintanis and the Misratans. But for any grand bargain to hold, it must address the core drivers of conflict inside Libya, rather than simply imposing a new political order from the outside.

No one faction can achieve victory in Libya. Blindly backing the anti-Islamist side and losing touch with developments on the ground would be a colossal mistake -- something recent events in Egypt and Iraq have made all too clear.

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Obama's Libya Debacle

How a Well-Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure

Alan J. Kuperman

AHMED JADALLAH / COURTESY REUTERS

Protesters chant slogans during a rally against former militia fighters in Tripoli, November 2013.

On March 17, 2011, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1973, spearheaded by the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama, authorizing military intervention in Libya. The goal, Obama explained, was to save the lives of peaceful, pro-democracy protesters who found themselves the target of a crackdown by Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi. Not only did Qaddafi endanger the momentum of the nascent Arab Spring, which had recently swept away authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, but he also was poised to commit a bloodbath in the Libyan city where the

uprising had started, said the president. “We knew that if we waited one more day, Benghazi—a city nearly the size of Charlotte—could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world,” Obama declared. Two days after the UN authorization, the United States and other NATO countries established a no-fly zone throughout Libya and started bombing Qaddafi’s forces. Seven months later, in October 2011, after an extended military campaign with sustained Western support, rebel forces conquered the country and shot Qaddafi dead.

In the immediate wake of the military victory, U.S. officials were triumphant. Writing in these pages in 2012, Ivo Daalder, then the U.S. permanent representative to NATO, and James Stavridis, then supreme allied commander of Europe, declared, “NATO’s operation in Libya has rightly been hailed as a model intervention.” In the Rose Garden after Qaddafi’s death, Obama himself crowed, “Without putting a single U.S. service member on the ground, we achieved our objectives.” Indeed, the United States seemed to have scored a hat trick: nurturing the Arab Spring, averting a Rwanda-like genocide, and eliminating Libya as a potential source of terrorism.

That verdict, however, turns out to have been premature. In retrospect, Obama’s intervention in Libya was an abject failure, judged even by its own standards. Libya has not only failed to evolve into a democracy; it has devolved into a failed state. Violent deaths and other human rights abuses have increased severalfold. Rather than helping the United States combat terrorism, as Qaddafi did during his last decade in power, Libya now serves as a safe haven for militias affiliated with both al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The Libya intervention has harmed other U.S. interests as well: undermining nuclear nonproliferation, chilling Russian cooperation at the UN, and fueling Syria’s civil war.

Despite what defenders of the mission claim, there was a better policy available—not intervening at all, because peaceful Libyan civilians were not actually being targeted. Had the United States and its allies followed that course, they could have spared Libya from the resulting chaos and given it a chance of progress under Qaddafi's chosen successor: his relatively liberal, Western-educated son Saif al-Islam. Instead, Libya today is riddled with vicious militias and anti-American terrorists—and thus serves as a cautionary tale of how humanitarian intervention can backfire for both the intervener and those it is intended to help.

A FAILED STATE

Optimism about Libya reached its apogee in July 2012, when democratic elections brought to power a moderate, secular coalition government—a stark change from Qaddafi's four decades of dictatorship. But the country quickly slid downhill. Its first elected prime minister, Mustafa Abu Shagour, lasted less than one month in office. His quick ouster foreshadowed the trouble to come: as of this writing, Libya has had seven prime ministers in less than four years. Islamists came to dominate the first postwar parliament, the General National Congress. Meanwhile, the new government failed to disarm dozens of militias that had arisen during NATO's seven-month intervention, especially Islamist ones, leading to deadly turf battles between rival tribes and commanders, which continue to this day. In October 2013, secessionists in eastern Libya, where most of the country's oil is located, declared their own government. That same month, Ali Zeidan, then the country's prime minister, was kidnapped and held hostage. In light of the growing Islamist influence within Libya's government, in the spring of 2014, the United States postponed a plan to train an armed force of 6,000–8,000 Libyan troops.

By May 2014, Libya had come to the brink of a new civil war—between liberals and Islamists. That month, a renegade secular general named Khalifa Hifter seized control of the air

force to attack Islamist militias in Benghazi, later expanding his targets to include the Islamist-dominated legislature in Tripoli. Elections last June did nothing to resolve the chaos. Most Libyans had already given up on democracy, as voter turnout dropped from 1.7 million in the previous poll to just 630,000. Secular parties declared victory and formed a new legislature, the House of Representatives, but the Islamists refused to accept that outcome. The result was two competing parliaments, each claiming to be the legitimate one.

In July, an Islamist militia from the city of Misurata responded to Hifter's actions by attacking Tripoli, prompting Western embassies to evacuate. After a six-week battle, the Islamists captured the capital in August on behalf of the so-called Libya Dawn coalition, which, together with the defunct legislature, formed what they labeled a "national salvation government." In October, the newly elected parliament, led by the secular Operation Dignity coalition, fled to the eastern city of Tobruk, where it established a competing interim government, which Libya's Supreme Court later declared unconstitutional. Libya thus finds itself with two warring governments, each controlling only a fraction of the country's territory and militias.

As bad as Libya's human rights situation was under Qaddafi, it has gotten worse since NATO ousted him. Immediately after taking power, the rebels perpetrated scores of reprisal killings, in addition to torturing, beating, and arbitrarily detaining thousands of suspected Qaddafi supporters. The rebels also expelled 30,000 mostly black residents from the town of Tawergha and burned or looted their homes and shops, on the grounds that some of them supposedly had been mercenaries. Six months after the war, Human Rights Watch declared that the abuses "appear to be so widespread and systematic that they may amount to crimes against humanity."

Such massive violations persist. In October 2013, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that the “vast majority of the estimated 8,000 conflict-related detainees are also being held without due process.” More disturbing, Amnesty International issued a report last year that revealed their savage mistreatment: “Detainees were subjected to prolonged beatings with plastic tubes, sticks, metal bars or cables. In some cases, they were subjected to electric shocks, suspended in contorted positions for hours, kept continuously blindfolded and shackled with their hands tied behind their backs or deprived of food and water.” The report also noted some 93 attacks on Libyan journalists in just the first nine months of 2014, “including abductions, arbitrary arrests, assassinations, assassination attempts and assaults.” Ongoing attacks in western Libya, the report concluded, “amount to war crimes.” As a consequence of such pervasive violence, the UN estimates that roughly 400,000 Libyans have fled their homes, a quarter of whom have left the country altogether.

Libya’s quality of life has been sharply degraded by an economic free fall. That is mainly because the country’s production of oil, its lifeblood, remains severely depressed by the protracted conflict. Prior to the revolution, Libya produced 1.65 million barrels of oil a day, a figure that dropped to zero during NATO’s intervention. Although production temporarily recovered to 85 percent of its previous rate, ever since secessionists seized eastern oil ports in August 2013, output has averaged only 30 percent of the prewar level. Ongoing fighting has closed airports and seaports in Libya’s two biggest cities, Tripoli and Benghazi. In many cities, residents are subjected to massive power outages—up to 18 hours a day in Tripoli. The recent privation represents a stark descent for a country that the UN’s Human Development Index traditionally had ranked as having the highest standard of living in all of Africa.

THE HUMAN COST

Although the White House justified its mission in Libya on humanitarian grounds, the intervention in fact greatly magnified the death toll there. To begin with, Qaddafi's crackdown turns out to have been much less lethal than media reports indicated at the time. In eastern Libya, where the uprising began as a mix of peaceful and violent protests, Human Rights Watch documented only 233 deaths in the first days of the fighting, not 10,000, as had been reported by the Saudi news channel Al Arabiya. In fact, as I documented in a 2013 International Security article, from mid-February 2011, when the rebellion started, to mid-March 2011, when NATO intervened, only about 1,000 Libyans died, including soldiers and rebels. Although an Al Jazeera article touted by Western media in early 2011 alleged that Qaddafi's air force had strafed and bombed civilians in Benghazi and Tripoli, "the story was untrue," revealed an exhaustive examination in the London Review of Books by Hugh Roberts of Tufts University. Indeed, striving to minimize civilian casualties, Qaddafi's forces had refrained from indiscriminate violence.

The best statistical evidence of that comes from Misurata, Libya's third-largest city, where the initial fighting raged most intensely. Human Rights Watch found that of the 949 people wounded there in the rebellion's first seven weeks, only 30 (just over three percent) were women or children, which indicates that Qaddafi's forces had narrowly targeted combatants, who were virtually all male. During that same period in Misurata, only 257 people were killed, a tiny fraction of the city's 400,000 residents.

The same pattern of restraint was evident in Tripoli, where the government used significant force for only two days prior to NATO's intervention, to beat back violent protesters who were burning government buildings. Libyan doctors subsequently told a UN investigative commission that they observed more than 200 corpses in the city's morgues on

February 20–21 but that only two of them were female. These statistics refute the notion that Qaddafi's forces fired indiscriminately at peaceful civilians.

Moreover, by the time NATO intervened, Libya's violence was on the verge of ending. Qaddafi's well-armed forces had routed the ragtag rebels, who were retreating home. By mid-March 2011, government forces were poised to recapture the last rebel stronghold of Benghazi, thereby ending the one-month conflict at a total cost of just over 1,000 lives. Just then, however, Libyan expatriates in Switzerland affiliated with the rebels issued warnings of an impending "bloodbath" in Benghazi, which Western media duly reported but which in retrospect appear to have been propaganda. In reality, on March 17, Qaddafi pledged to protect the civilians of Benghazi, as he had those of other recaptured cities, adding that his forces had "left the way open" for the rebels to retreat to Egypt. Simply put, the militants were about to lose the war, and so their overseas agents raised the specter of genocide to attract a NATO intervention—which worked like a charm. There is no evidence or reason to believe that Qaddafi had planned or intended to perpetrate a killing campaign.

Admittedly, the government did attempt to intimidate the rebels, promising to pursue them relentlessly. But Qaddafi never translated that rhetoric into targeting civilians. From March 5 to March 15, 2011, government forces recaptured all but one of the major rebel-held cities, and in none did they kill civilians in revenge, let alone commit a bloodbath. Indeed, as his forces approached Benghazi, Qaddafi issued public reassurances that they would harm neither civilians nor rebels who disarmed. On March 17, he directly addressed the rebels of Benghazi: "Throw away your weapons, exactly like your brothers in Ajdabiya and other places did. They laid down their arms and they are safe. We never pursued them at all."

Two days later, however, the NATO air campaign halted Qaddafi's offensive. As a result, Benghazi did not return to government control, the rebels did not flee, and the war did not end. Instead, the militants reversed their retreat and went back on the offensive. Eventually, on October 20, 2011, the rebels found Qaddafi, tortured him, and then summarily executed him. The regime's last remnants fell three days later. All told, the intervention extended Libya's civil war from less than six weeks to more than eight months.

Claims of the number killed during the war have varied wildly. At a closed-door conference in November 2011 organized by the Brookings Institution, one U.S. official characterized the final death toll as "around 8,000." By contrast, the rebels' health minister asserted in September 2011, before the war was even over, that 30,000 Libyans had already died. However, the postwar government's Ministry of Martyrs and Missing Persons sharply reduced that figure to 4,700 civilians and rebels, plus an equal or lesser number of regime forces, and 2,100 people missing on both sides—for a high-end death estimate of 11,500.

Aggregate casualty statistics were not compiled during the subsequent two years of persistent low-level conflict, but reports did emerge of several significant skirmishes, such as a March 2012 fight between rival tribes in the southern city of Sabha that left 147 dead. In light of such figures, it is reasonable to estimate that the conflict killed at least 500 people a year in 2012 and 2013. Better data are available for the renewed civil war of 2014. The website Libya Body Count, which documents casualties daily, reports that the total number of Libyans killed last year was more than 2,750. Moreover, unlike Qaddafi's forces in 2011, the militias fighting in Libya today do use force indiscriminately. In August 2014, for example, the Tripoli Medical Center reported that of the 100 killed in recent violence, 40 were women and at least nine were children. The following month,

in a blatant war crime, militants fired a multiple-rocket launcher at a medical facility.

This grim math leads to a depressing but unavoidable conclusion. Before NATO's intervention, Libya's civil war was on the verge of ending, at the cost of barely 1,000 lives. Since then, however, Libya has suffered at least 10,000 additional deaths from conflict. In other words, NATO's intervention appears to have increased the violent death toll more than tenfold.

TERRITORY FOR TERRORISTS

Another unintended consequence of the Libya intervention has been to amplify the threat of terrorism from the country. Although Qaddafi supported terrorism decades ago—as witnessed by his regime's later paying reparations for the Lockerbie airplane bombing of 1988—the Libyan leader had evolved into a U.S. ally against global terrorism even before 9/11. He did so partly because he faced a domestic threat from al Qaeda–affiliated militants, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. Qaddafi's external security chief, Moussa Koussa, met multiple times with senior CIA officials to provide intelligence about Libyan fighters in Afghanistan and about the Pakistani nuclear peddler A. Q. Khan. In 2009, General William Ward, who headed U.S. Africa Command, praised Libya as "a top partner in combating transnational terrorism."

Since NATO's intervention in 2011, however, Libya and its neighbor Mali have turned into terrorist havens. Radical Islamist groups, which Qaddafi had suppressed, emerged under NATO air cover as some of the most competent fighters of the rebellion. Supplied with weapons by sympathetic countries such as Qatar, the militias refused to disarm after Qaddafi fell. Their persistent threat was highlighted in September 2012 when jihadists, including from the group Ansar al-Sharia, attacked the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, killing Christopher Stevens, the U.S. ambassador to

Libya, and three of his colleagues. Last year, the UN formally declared Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organization because of its affiliation with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

Libya's Islamist militants are now fighting for control of the entire country, and they are making headway. In April 2014, they captured a secret military base near Tripoli that, ironically, U.S. special operations forces had established in the summer of 2012 to train Libyan counterterrorist forces. Qatar and Sudan have flown weapons to the Islamists as recently as September 2014. In response, the more secular governments of the United Arab Emirates and Egypt launched air strikes against Islamist militants in Tripoli and Benghazi in August and October of last year. Libya's jihadists now include more than just al Qaeda affiliates; as of January 2015, factions aligned with ISIS, also known as the Islamic State, have perpetrated killings or kidnappings in all three of Libya's traditional administrative zones.

NATO's intervention also fostered Islamist terrorism elsewhere in the region. When Qaddafi fell, the ethnic Tuaregs of Mali within his security forces fled home with their weapons to launch their own rebellion. That uprising was quickly hijacked by local Islamist forces and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which declared an independent Islamic state in Mali's northern half. By December 2012, this zone of Mali had become "the largest territory controlled by Islamic extremists in the world," according to Senator Christopher Coons, chair of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Africa. The danger was elaborated by The New York Times, which reported that "al Qaeda's affiliate in North Africa is operating terrorist training camps in northern Mali and providing arms, explosives and financing to a militant Islamist organization in northern Nigeria." But the spillover from Libya did not stop there, also spurring deadly ethnic conflict in Burkina Faso and the growth of radical Islam in Niger. To contain this threat, in early 2013, France was compelled to deploy

thousands of troops to Mali, some of whom continue to fight jihadists in the country's north.

The terrorism problem was exacerbated by the leakage of sensitive weapons from Qaddafi's arsenal to radical Islamists across North Africa and the Middle East. Peter Bouckaert of Human Rights Watch estimates that ten times as many weapons went loose in Libya as in Somalia, Afghanistan, or Iraq. Perhaps the greatest concern is man-portable air defense systems, known as MANPADs, which in capable hands can be used to shoot down both civilian airliners and military aircraft. Up to 15,000 such missiles were unaccounted for as of February 2012, according to a U.S. State Department official cited in a Washington Post column; a $40 million buyback effort had secured only 5,000 of them. The column added that hundreds of these weapons were still on the loose, including in Niger, where some had been obtained by Boko Haram, the radical Islamist group across the border in northern Nigeria. Another few dozen have been found in Algeria and Egypt.

The missiles have even made their way through Egypt to the Gaza Strip. In October 2012, militants there fired one for the first time, just missing an Israeli army helicopter, and Israeli officials said that the weapons originated in Libya. More recently, in early 2014, Islamists in Egypt used another such missile to shoot down a military helicopter. Libyan MANPADs and sea mines have even surfaced in West African arms markets, where Somali buyers have snapped them up for Islamist rebels and pirates far away in northeastern Africa.

THE BROADER BACKLASH

The harm from the intervention in Libya extends well beyond the immediate neighborhood. For one thing, by helping overthrow Qaddafi, the United States undercut its own nuclear nonproliferation objectives. In 2003, Qaddafi had voluntarily halted his nuclear and chemical weapons

programs and surrendered his arsenals to the United States. His reward, eight years later, was a U.S.-led regime change that culminated in his violent death. That experience has greatly complicated the task of persuading other states to halt or reverse their nuclear programs. Shortly after the air campaign began, North Korea released a statement from an unnamed Foreign Ministry official saying that “the Libyan crisis is teaching the international community a grave lesson” and that North Korea would not fall for the same U.S. “tactic to disarm the country.” Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, likewise noted that Qaddafi had “wrapped up all his nuclear facilities, packed them on a ship, and delivered them to the West.” Another well-connected Iranian, Abbas Abdi, observed: “When Qaddafi was faced with an uprising, all Western leaders dropped him like a brick. Judging from that, our leaders assess that compromise is not helpful.”

The intervention in Libya may also have fostered violence in Syria. In March 2011, Syria’s uprising was still largely nonviolent, and the Assad government’s response, although criminally disproportionate, was relatively circumscribed, claiming the lives of fewer than 100 Syrians per week. After NATO gave Libya’s rebels the upper hand, however, Syria’s revolutionaries turned to violence in the summer of 2011, perhaps expecting to attract a similar intervention. “It’s similar to Benghazi,” a Syrian rebel told The Washington Post at the time, adding, “We need a no-fly zone.” The result was a massive escalation of the Syrian conflict, leading to at least 1,500 deaths per week by early 2013, a 15-fold increase.

NATO’s mission in Libya also hindered peacemaking efforts in Syria by greatly antagonizing Russia. With Moscow’s acquiescence, the UN Security Council had approved the establishment of a no-fly zone in Libya and other measures to protect civilians. But NATO exceeded that mandate to pursue regime change. The coalition targeted Qaddafi’s forces for seven months—even as they retreated, posing no threat to

civilians—and armed and trained rebels who rejected peace talks. As Russian President Vladimir Putin complained, NATO forces “frankly violated the UN Security Council resolution on Libya, when instead of imposing the so-called no-fly zone over it they started bombing it too.” His foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, explained that as a result, in Syria, Russia “would never allow the Security Council to authorize anything similar to what happened in Libya.”

Early in the Arab Spring, proponents of intervening in Libya had claimed that this course would sustain the momentum of the relatively peaceful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. In reality, NATO’s action not only failed to spread peaceful revolution but also encouraged the militarization of the uprising in Syria and impeded the prospect of UN intervention there. For Syria and its neighbors, the consequence has been the tragic exacerbation of three pathologies: humanitarian suffering, sectarianism, and radical Islam.

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Despite the massive turmoil caused by the intervention, some of its unrepentant supporters claim that the alternative—leaving Qaddafi in power—would have been even worse. But Qaddafi was not Libya’s future in any case. Sixty-nine years old and in ill health, he was laying the groundwork for a transition to his son Saif, who for many years had been preparing a reform agenda. “I will not accept any position unless there is a new constitution, new laws, and transparent elections,” Saif declared in 2010. “Everyone should have access to public office. We should not have a monopoly on power.” Saif also convinced his father that the regime should admit culpability for a notorious 1996 prison massacre and pay compensation to the families of hundreds of victims. In addition, in 2008, Saif published testimony from former prisoners alleging torture by revolutionary committees—the regime’s zealous but unofficial watchdogs—whom he

demanded be disarmed.

From 2009 to 2010, Saif persuaded his father to release nearly all of Libya's political prisoners, creating a deradicalization program for Islamists that Western experts cited as a model. He also advocated abolishing Libya's Information Ministry in favor of private media. He even flew in renowned American scholars—including Francis Fukuyama, Robert Putnam, and Cass Sunstein—to lecture on civil society and democracy. Perhaps the clearest indication of Saif's reform credentials is that in 2011, the revolution's top political leaders turned out to be officials whom he had brought into the government earlier. Mahmoud Jibril, prime minister of the rebels' National Transitional Council during the war, had led Saif's National Economic Development Board. Mustafa Abdel Jalil, chair of the National Transitional Council, was selected by Saif in 2007 to promote judicial reform as Libya's justice minister, which he did until defecting to the rebels.

Of course, it is impossible to know if Saif would have proved willing or able to transform Libya. He faced opposition from entrenched interests, as even his father did when attempting reform. In 2010, conservatives temporarily closed the media outlets that Saif owned because one of his newspapers had published an op-ed critical of the government. By late 2010, however, the elder Qaddafi had sacked his more hard-line son Mutassim, a move that appeared to pave the way for Saif and his reformist agenda. Although Saif was not going to turn Libya into a Jeffersonian democracy overnight, he did appear intent on eliminating the most egregious inefficiencies and inequities of his father's regime.

Even after the war began, respected observers voiced confidence in Saif. In a New York Times op-ed, Curt Weldon, a former ten-term Republican U.S. congressman from Pennsylvania, wrote that Saif "could play a constructive role

as a member of the committee to devise a new government structure or Constitution." Instead, NATO-supported militants captured and imprisoned Qaddafi's son. In an October 2014 jailhouse interview with the journalist Franklin Lamb, Saif voiced his regrets: "We were in the process of making broad reforms, and my father gave me the responsibility to see them through. Unfortunately, the revolt happened, and both sides made mistakes that are now allowing extreme Islamist groups like Da'ish [ISIS] to pick up the pieces and turn Libya into an extreme fundamentalist entity."

LEARNING FROM LIBYA

Obama also acknowledges regrets about Libya, but unfortunately, he has drawn the wrong lesson. "I think we underestimated . . . the need to come in full force," the president told the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman in August 2014. "If you're gonna do this," he elaborated, "there has to be a much more aggressive effort to rebuild societies."

But that is exactly the wrong take-away. The error in Libya was not an inadequate post-intervention effort; it was the decision to intervene in the first place. In cases such as Libya, where a government is quashing a rebellion, military intervention is very likely to backfire by fostering violence, state failure, and terrorism. The prospect of intervention also creates perverse incentives for militants to provoke government retaliation and then cry genocide to attract foreign assistance—the moral hazard of humanitarian intervention.

The real lesson of Libya is that when a state is narrowly targeting rebels, the international community needs to refrain from launching a military campaign on humanitarian grounds to help the militants. Western audiences should also beware cynical rebels who exaggerate not only the state's violence but their own popular support, too. Even where a regime is

highly flawed, as Qaddafi's was, chances are that intervention will only fuel civil war—destabilizing the country, endangering civilians, and paving the way for extremists. The prudent path is to promote peaceful reform of the type that Qaddafi's son Saif was pursuing.

Humanitarian intervention should be reserved for the rare instances in which civilians are being targeted and military action can do more good than harm, such as Rwanda in 1994, where I have estimated that a timely operation could have saved over 100,000 lives. Of course, great powers sometimes may want to use force abroad for other reasons—to fight terrorism, avert nuclear proliferation, or overthrow a noxious dictator. But they should not pretend the resulting war is humanitarian, or be surprised when it gets a lot of innocent civilians killed.

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Who Lost Libya?

Obama's Intervention in Retrospect

Derek Chollet and Ben Fishman; Alan J. Kuperman

ESAM OMRAN AL-FETORI / REUTERS

Marking the third anniversary of the start of the battle for Benghazi, March 2014.

A CLOSE CALL

It is tempting to view the chaos in Libya today as yet one more demonstration of the futility of U.S.-led military interventions. That is precisely the case that Alan Kuperman makes in his article ("Obama's Libya Debacle," March/April 2015), which asserts that NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya was "an abject failure" that set free Libya's vast conventional weapons stockpiles, gave rise to extremist groups, and even

exacerbated the conflict in Syria. Today, no one involved in Libya policy since the overthrow of Muammar al-Qaddafi is satisfied with how events have unfolded. As Kuperman rightly notes, U.S. President Barack Obama has said that what has happened there is one of his greatest regrets and that he draws lessons from it when considering U.S. military interventions elsewhere.

But Kuperman goes much further, arguing that the situation that led to NATO's intervention wasn't so bad—that Qaddafi's threat to civilians was overblown and that the United States and Europe were snookered into thinking there was a humanitarian emergency. The better course, according to Kuperman, would have been to allow the regime to defeat the uprising, which it was on the verge of doing when NATO intervened, and instead invest in a political solution with Qaddafi's son Saif al-Islam. Such arguments are seductive in hindsight, but they don't shed any light on what policymakers confronted at the time, and in the case of the Saif counterfactual, they are misguided.

When the Libya crisis erupted in February 2011, reports came in from all corners—diplomatic and intelligence assessments from the United States and Europe, press reports, and eyewitness accounts—that the regime was perpetrating arbitrary arrests, torture, and killings. Given his record, the world rallied to pressure Qaddafi to relent. In late February, the UN Security Council unanimously approved a resolution calling for an immediate end to the violence and imposing an arms embargo on Libya and sanctions against the Qaddafi family and key regime members.

Of course, things only got worse. Qaddafi's own actions and rhetoric made clear to those of us in Washington (and even to the usually skeptical Russia and reticent Arab League) that he would not step aside easily and that a humanitarian catastrophe loomed. If the uprising continued, Qaddafi's

forces would eventually regroup and rout the rebel forces in the east with the benefit of superior arms.

Kuperman describes Qaddafi as publicly offering reassurances and peace overtures, but what most everyone else saw was a Qaddafi who went to the airwaves and pledged that there would be “no mercy” and that his troops would go house to house looking for “traitors.” “Capture the rats,” he told followers. On March 15, 2011, as Qaddafi’s forces shelled the city of Ajdabiya, The New York Times reported from the frontlines on the frantic exodus under way: “Hundreds of cars packed with children, mattresses, suitcases—anything that could be grabbed and packed in—careened through the streets as residents fled. Long lines of cars could be seen on the highway heading north to Benghazi, about 100 miles away.” As Qaddafi’s forces bore down on Benghazi, a city of nearly 700,000 people, the world saw a slaughter in the making.

REUTERS / ESAM OMRAN AL-FETORI

Members of the Libyan pro-government forces, backed by locals, gather on a tank in Benghazi, January 2015.

That said, the decision to use military force was a close call, one that divided top U.S. officials and that Obama approached carefully. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who opposed the intervention, recalled in his memoir that the president told him it was a “51–49” decision. The military campaign that the United States designed and led (even if from behind the scenes) was tightly limited to ending attacks against civilians and achieving a cease-fire that would pave the way for a political transition. Unfortunately, despite the diplomatic efforts of the United States and others—a UN envoy, an African Union initiative, a Russian special envoy, and even a Russian chess player—leaving power was the last thing Qaddafi proved interested in. As a result of his intransigence, it was Qaddafi himself, and not NATO, who turned the intervention from a mission to protect civilians into something that led to regime change.

In a July 2011 meeting with Qaddafi’s representatives in Tunis, U.S. envoys (one of us, Derek Chollet, among them) made one last attempt to offer a way out. Instead of exploring the terms of a deal for Qaddafi to step aside, the Libyans blustered that the rebellion was driven by “foreign agents” and al Qaeda and that Washington should be supporting them instead of bombing them. They expressed genuine disappointment, believing that since the reopening of ties in 2003, the United States would “protect them.” After the war, some of these Libyan officials admitted to U.S. officials that they had understood the brutal nature of the regime they were part of and that at no point during the first months of the bombing did Qaddafi’s family or inner circle believe they would be defeated—that, in the words of one of Qaddafi’s closest confidantes, they suffered from “supreme arrogance and miscalculation.” Given this, it seems that the way Qaddafi ended his rule—on the run and hiding in a sewer pipe, before being killed—was inevitable.

But even if members of the regime had been willing to

negotiate Qaddafi's exit, Kuperman's assertion that Qaddafi's son Saif would have been a viable alternative is far-fetched. (It's worth pointing out that Saif's principal aide participated in the Tunis meeting.) Unfortunately for the Libyan people, Saif was part of the problem, not the solution. True, he played the role of reformer in the eyes of the international community for a brief period. But he was focused primarily on removing Libya from sanctions lists in order to entice investors. There is no evidence that genuine political reform was anywhere on Saif's agenda, despite his having handsomely paid some notable American academics to give lectures in Libya—just as his brothers paid for pop stars to perform on their private yachts. Indeed, any political liberalization or additional transparency would have interfered with Qaddafi's ability to use state wealth for his family's personal benefit.

U.S. officials who had dealt with Saif after Libya renounced terrorism and gave up its nuclear weapons ambitions in 2004 considered him overrated and, by the time of the war, irreconcilable. If there was any remaining hope that Saif could act as a moderating influence on his father and convince him to relinquish power, it was dashed on the evening of February 20, three days after the protests broke out in Benghazi. In a rambling late-night speech that matched his father's tone in venom, Saif warned the rebels that the Libyan government was not as weak as the regimes that had fallen in Tunisia and Egypt. He suggested that the protests were overblown and manipulated by outside actors, and he promised to "fight to the last bullet." For previously loyal Libyan public servants, such as Ali Aujali, then the ambassador to the United States, it was Saif's speech that prompted them to defect to the opposition.

By arguing that the United States never should have been involved in the first place, Kuperman avoids the tougher problem: how it could have handled postwar Libya better,

especially given its limited influence over a government that has not been eager to accept help and its limited ability to deliver that help even if the government wanted it.

The paradox of postwar Libya was that the Libyan people and their consecutive interim governments both demanded their independence and insisted on international aid. That dynamic caused perpetual frustration in the international community as it sought to help rebuild the Libyan institutions that Qaddafi had decimated. For this reason, the international community trod carefully, charging the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and its successive special representatives of the UN secretary-general, to oversee the design, coordination, and implementation of aid programs. Contrary to the assertions of some critics, there was never a realistic option for establishing an international peacekeeping or postconflict security mechanism, because the Libyans did not want it. And no viable candidates from the West or the region stepped up to lead or compose such a force, because no one wanted to participate in an enterprise that might appear neocolonial.

Absent a peacekeeping effort, UNSMIL and Libya's key allies sought to put together a variety of assistance programs that could start rebuilding Libya's economic, judicial, and, most important, security institutions. Those offers no doubt could have been better coordinated, but every assistance program took weeks, if not months, for the Libyans to accept—and even longer to get started due to the torturous pace of decision-making, Libyan ministers' lack of budgetary authority, and the public sector's minimal bureaucratic capacity. For example, Italy, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States all worked to build a Libyan "general-purpose force" to replace the militias, but Libya's administrative incompetence and lack of both resources and qualified recruits got in the way. Despite a massive effort, this initiative collapsed. In fact, beyond some effective civil society

and elections assistance programs, just one program designed and implemented between 2012 and 2014 has worked as intended in the security sphere: the destruction of leftover and undeclared chemical weapons.

Yes, the international community could have demanded more from the Libyans. Looking back, perhaps it was too deferential to Libyan sensitivities about interference in the country's internal affairs, and perhaps officials should have pressed the Libyans much harder to disarm and demobilize the militias and reincorporate them into a reformed military structure. But outsiders' leverage was limited; the United States and its partners could not force decisions, sign essential documents, or extract payments from a dysfunctional budget process. Instead, the militias proliferated and were legitimized by the Libyan government, leading to the chaos of today.

The other major problem the United States faced was a lack of on-the-ground personnel who could evaluate the situation firsthand, work with the Libyan government, coordinate with allies, and report back to Washington with recommendations. Just around ten U.S. officers were performing these tasks in Tripoli in 2012, a consequence of security concerns and the fact that the U.S. embassy had to be completely overhauled after having been evacuated and ransacked in 2011. After Christopher Stevens, the U.S. ambassador to Libya, was killed in 2012, Washington understandably prioritized recovering from the tragedy of his death and ensuring the protection of the remaining personnel, making it excessively difficult to gain any additional traction in assisting the Libyan government. Last year, the United States and most other countries shuttered their embassies in Tripoli due to security concerns.

These are only some preliminary lessons from the intervention and its aftermath. Unlike the interventions in the

Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq, which involved thousands of troops, the one in Libya offered U.S. diplomats and aid officials none of the assets (or occasional disadvantages) of the U.S. military. Rebuilding civilian ministries and interacting with local populations are certainly easier under the protection of U.S. or coalition military forces. As Obama has made clear, additional planning is necessary for such light-footprint approaches to postwar stabilization.

While we disagree with Kuperman's conclusions, his prodigious research into the Libya intervention illustrates the dilemmas policymakers face, especially the twin challenges of information and time. It also brings to mind the different perspectives of analysts and decision-makers. As Henry Kissinger observed in his book Diplomacy, analysts can choose the problems they want to study, "whereas the statesman's problems are imposed on him." And although analysts possess all the facts, have ample time to reach their conclusions, and face minimal risks in being wrong, the pressure of time, he wrote, is the "overwhelming challenge" for policymakers, who "must act on assessments that cannot be proved at the time" and whose "mistakes are irretrievable."

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KUPERMAN REPLIES:

I appreciate that Derek Chollet and Ben Fishman concede one

of the central tenets of my recent article: that in the wake of NATO's 2011 intervention, a "military campaign that the United States designed and led," there is "chaos in Libya today." But these two former officials from the U.S. National Security Council attempt to pin blame on everyone except those most responsible: President Barack Obama and his senior advisers who lobbied for the intervention.

Chollet and Fishman say that it is not the administration's fault for intervening on the false pretense of an impending bloodbath, because the whole "world saw a slaughter in the making." But that simply is not true. The world's top two human rights organizations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, never warned of an impending massacre in Libya. Nor did the U.S. intelligence community, according to one of its senior officials, who told The Washington Times this past January that the intervention "was an intelligence-light decision."

My exposure of this flawed premise for war does not reflect merely the 20-20 hindsight of an academic, as Chollet and Fishman suggest. To the contrary, I warned of Libyan trickery as far back as March 2011, writing in USA Today: "Despite ubiquitous cellphone cameras, there are no images of genocidal violence, a claim that smacks of rebel propaganda." Given that experts in the intelligence, human rights, and scholarly communities expressed strong doubts at the time about rebel warnings of an impending bloodbath, it is the Obama administration that must accept responsibility for spearheading a disastrous intervention on phony grounds.

In another dodge, Chollet and Fishman allege that it was Muammar al-Qaddafi's fault for failing to negotiate a peaceful outcome "despite the diplomatic efforts of the United States and others." The facts show otherwise. Just three days into the bombing campaign, it was the Obama administration that unilaterally terminated peace negotiations between U.S.

Africa Command and the Qaddafi regime.

Charles Kubic, a retired rear admiral in the U.S. Navy, who brokered the negotiations, told The Washington Times that Qaddafi's military leaders had proposed a peace plan under which "the Libyans would stop all combat operations and withdraw all military forces to the outskirts of the cities and assume a defensive posture." Qaddafi, Kubic recounted, "was willing to step down and permit a transition government" under two conditions: that his inner circle receive free passage out of the country and that Libya's military retain sufficient force to fight radical Islamists. Looking back, Kubic posed a key question regarding the approach of Obama and his team: "If their goal was to get Qaddafi out of power, then why not give a 72-hour truce a try?" For these administration officials, he concluded, "it wasn't enough to get him out of power; they wanted him dead."

Unaware, Qaddafi continued to pursue peace talks in vain. On April 10, 2011, he accepted an African Union proposal for an immediate cease-fire to be followed by a national dialogue. But the rebels declared that they would reject any cease-fire until Qaddafi had left power, and the Obama administration backed this intransigent position. Still seeking peace, Qaddafi's government offered on May 26 not merely to cease its fire but also to negotiate a constitution and pay compensation to victims. The rebels summarily rejected this offer as well, supported, again, by the Obama administration.

The authors report that Chollet and other U.S. negotiators, in July 2011, after four months of NATO bombing, offered "a deal for Qaddafi to step aside." They claim that because Qaddafi rejected such demands for unilateral surrender, "it was Qaddafi himself, and not NATO, who turned the intervention from a mission to protect civilians into something that led to regime change."

But this assertion turns logic on its head. The Obama administration had insisted on regime change from the very start. On March 3, 2011, two weeks before NATO intervened, Obama declared that Qaddafi “must step down from power and leave.” That explains why the State Department ordered U.S. Africa Command to halt peace talks on March 22, and why NATO kept bombing even after the rebels repeatedly rejected negotiations.

The most repugnant part of Chollet and Fishman’s response comes when they blame Qaddafi for his own torture and execution. It was because of the Libyan leader’s refusal to acquiesce to NATO bombing, they insist, that “the way Qaddafi ended his rule—on the run and hiding in a sewer pipe, before being killed—was inevitable.”

Not so. This gruesome denouement was hardly inevitable. Instead, it was the result of the Obama administration’s serial errors: starting a war of choice based on a faulty premise, exceeding the UN’s mandate to protect civilians, rejecting Qaddafi’s peace offers, insisting on regime change, and supporting an opposition composed of radical Islamists and fractious militias.

After Qaddafi’s death was confirmed in October 2011, a gloating Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared to a television reporter, “We came, we saw, he died!” She was justified in claiming credit on behalf of the Obama administration for the outcome in Libya, including Qaddafi’s brutal murder. Back then, however, she and her colleagues believed their intervention was a success. Now that it has turned into a dismal failure, it is too late to shed responsibility. As President George W. Bush learned the hard way, “mission accomplished” can be declared, but subsequent events may haunt you.

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Setting the Record Straight on Benghazi

What Really Led to Libya's Chaos

Ethan Chorin

ESAM AL-FETORI / REUTERS

A person reacts as the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi is seen in flames during a protest by an armed group said to have been protesting a film being produced in the United States September 11, 2012.

There has been no shortage of attention paid to the 2012 terrorist attack on the U.S. compound in Benghazi. Most of the questions, however, have centered on the shortcomings in Washington's response to the crisis, rather than the causes and effects of the Benghazi attack itself. A closer look at Islamist politics in Libya reveals that this singular event was part of a larger plan to create an Islamic State within Libya

after the fall of former leader Muammar al Qaddafi.

In fact, over the span of a few years, Libya turned from one of North Africa's least radicalized countries into a global Islamist hub. Benghazi may have been a flash point in the story of Libya's unraveling, but it is one event among many that has forever altered the country's trajectory. To understand what led to the siege on the U.S. installation in Benghazi, one must look back to Washington's rapprochement with Qaddafi.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 coincided with a process of Western rapprochement with Libya, opening the oil-rich country to foreign business. Crippling UN sanctions, prompted by Qaddafi's 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, had already been suspended by 1999 after Qaddafi agreed to hand over two suspects for trial in The Hague. The U.S. State Department would have been content to see Qaddafi's regime stew in sanctions indefinitely, but his readmission into the international community seemed inevitable. And so, the administration of President George W. Bush saw an opportunity to press Qaddafi, bolstering a narrative that the U.S. intervention in Iraq could help topple other rogue states. The administration could pressure Qaddafi to abandon his incipient nuclear and chemical weapons programs, and to compensate the families of the Pan Am 103 victims. The United States set up a diplomatic outpost in Libya in 2004, the same year that the EU arms embargo was lifted.

Although contentious within Washington (and the State Department in particular), the deal with Libya was attractive for another reason: It offered the prospect of access to Qaddafi's intelligence on regional radical groups. In particular, it could provide information on al Qaeda. Libya had an odd but important role in the growth of al Qaeda: A small but growing number of Libyan youths were attracted to

al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's calls for jihad in Afghanistan, and many used their experience with the organization as a means of gaining experience to eventually wage war against Qaddafi. Libyan al Qaeda members were fiercely pursued at home, barring their return to the country. Therefore, many became lieutenants for bin Laden, and used the organization to incubate a new group, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which shared leaders and attempted to grow cells within Libya itself.

The agreement also made Qaddafi see an opening for intelligence collaboration: From 2003 to 2005, the CIA and British intelligence managed to track down more than 30 of Libya's most-wanted fighters, many of whom were in Afghanistan, and delivered them back to Libya for interrogation (and undoubtedly, torture) as part of the Bush-era extraordinary rendition program. Included were much of LIFG's leadership, including its former head, Abdelhakim Belhadj, who would become an influential power broker in post-revolution Libya.

The United States and the United Kingdom helped Qaddafi orchestrate an extensive, multi-year political makeover, fronted by Qaddafi's son, Saif al Islam. Critically, this makeover included reconciliation with some of the same regime opponents the United States had rendered back to Libya, as well as with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood is the region's largest Islamist group. Founded by Hassan Al Banna in Egypt in 1928, it established a branch in Libya in 1949. But in part due to Qaddafi's vigilance, the group never developed a major presence in Libya, as it had in Egypt and Tunisia. The Brotherhood has been widely seen as moderate, but questions about the organization's connections to radical and terrorist organizations have grown, as evidenced by a recent study commissioned by the UK government.

According to a new biography of Saif by Mohammed Al Houni, his advisor during the era of Western rapprochement, senior Qatari officials convinced Saif that involving the offices of the Muslim Brotherhood outside of Libya to secure a truce with the LIFG (and the Brotherhood itself) would be essential to Libya's stability as it opened itself to the West.

CHRIS HELGREN / REUTERS

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's most prominent son, Saif al-Islam, pauses during an interview with Reuters in Tripoli March 10, 2011.

Saif thus called on Ali Sallabi, a prominent Libyan Muslim Brotherhood member living in Qatar, to negotiate a deal between the senior LIFG members, who were back in Libya. According to this deal, LIFG leaders would be released if they agreed to public renouncement of violence against the regime. The agreement was signed (to the objection of other LIFG members and al Qaeda abroad), and Saif delivered a speech in March of 2010 announcing the release of prisoners. Many in Qaddafi's inner circle opposed this move, and questioned the sincerity of the LIFG members' conversion,

but they were overruled. U.S.–Libyan relations started to go downhill rapidly thereafter due to Qaddafi's erratic maneuvers, including a 90-minute rant at the United Nations, talk of re-nationalizing Libya's oil industry, and threats the leader made against U.S. diplomats in Tripoli.

It was within this context that the Libyan revolution occurred, as part of the larger Arab Spring. There were Islamists in this mix, but they did not lead the revolution. They did, however, stand to benefit from it disproportionately. Forty-two years of misrule had gutted Libya's institutions, making the country highly susceptible to chaos that facilitated a takeover. Foreign fighters flooded into Libya from neighboring states, seeking refuge and a base for expansion. Libyan Islamists were more organized than the multi-faceted and fractious progressive groups within the country. They were also were heavily supported by the Muslim Brotherhood, al Qaeda, and outside states.

Perhaps most importantly, Libyan Islamist groups benefitted from a vague and growing consensus in Washington that moderate political Islam, as represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey's division between mosque and state, might be the answer to many of its problems in the Middle East. This counterintuitive view was underpinned by Washington think tank studies and op-eds by former U.S. officials, including former Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, who suggested the time had come to hear out the Muslim Brotherhood. It also dovetailed with evolving doctrine of leading from behind—wherein Washington would promote a cooperative local proxy that would support U.S. objectives while obviating the need for greater intervention and expenditure—at a time when the Obama administration was trying to disengage militarily from the region. The Muslim Brotherhood's victory in Egypt's 2012 elections seemed to convince Washington of political Islam's inevitability, and led many to feel it was better to side with supposed moderates.

What planners in Washington failed to take into account, however, was that Libya was not Egypt or Turkey. They gravely overestimated the appeal of radical Islam in Libya, a young but socially conservative and observant society with an important Sufi past (Sufism is anathema to Islamists). Therefore, the United States did little to enable the Libyan majority to assert itself in the face of a rapidly forming Islamist plan to take over the country. Making matters worse was the fact that self-proclaimed moderate Islamists would say very different things to different constituencies. Foreign diplomats were thus taken aback when progressive Libyan groups, as represented by Mahmoud Jibril's National Forces Alliance, dominated the elections in 2012 and 2014.

GORAN TOMASEVIC / REUTERS

A rebel soldier gestures atop a car as he heads to Brega, in Ajdabiya March 2, 2011.

IN THE AFTERMATH OF INTERVENTION

In many ways, the U.S. intervention in Libya was a heroic decision—a substantial political risk taken on principle at a time when doing nothing was an obviously safer option. Several years later, however, the decision to intervene on behalf of the rebels has come to be seen as the original sin that led to Libya's status as both a failed state and a base for ISIS. But the intervention did not cause the cause of the resulting disaster. Rather, it was heavily conditioned by what the West had done in years prior—including the return of extremists to Libya, the passive agreement to lifting arms embargos on the Qaddafi regime, and support for the rapprochement between Qaddafi and Libyan radicals.

In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Qatar and Turkey committed resources to keep Libya's nascent government alive. And for that, most Libyans were supremely grateful. Their appreciation eroded, however, when it appeared that both countries supported Islamists instead of the country's future. Qatar sent nearly 20 tons of military supplies to help liberate Tripoli. And when these goods arrived in Benghazi, they were diverted from the interim Transitional National Council and its moderate leaders, to members of the Muslim Brotherhood and put under the control of Belhaj, the former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group emir.

THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION HIJACKED

Once the initial uprising and foreign intervention ended, Libya's Islamists (as well as many external groups) set out to thwart the country's new leaders. The nascent government's hasty relocation to Tripoli left Benghazi exposed. Within months, the city saw a rising tide of anonymous assassinations of security officials, military intelligence, civil society activists, intellectuals, and journalists—anyone who might interfere with an Islamist takeover. The murder of rebel military commander Abdelfatah Younes in July 2011 should

have been a clear red flag: Younes had been Qaddafi's anti-Islamist enforcer, and was seen by many Islamists as the biggest threat to an Islamist takeover.

Before the U.S. compound attack, Benghazi was a livable city, despite the number of weapons in the hands of its citizens. Civic pride was high, garbage was being collected, and there was relatively little violent crime. In May of 2012, the city even elected its first female mayor, who was also the single largest vote-getter. This period of calm would prove to be the last chance the international community had at training security forces, strengthening medical infrastructure, and rebuilding the city, as a bulwark of Libya's fragile democracy. Benghazi's security situation began to collapse by early June—almost a year and a half after the revolution. The city bore witness to numerous attacks on high-profile local and foreign figures, including several ambassadors. The attack on the U.S. compound was but the culminating act of violence in the city. What followed was the destruction of the Libyan nation-state, and the resurrection of factional fighting throughout the country.

ESAM OMRAN AL-FETORI / REUTERS

A member of the Libyan pro-government forces, backed by the locals, holds his weapon as he looks through a hole in a wall, during clashes with the Shura Council of Libyan Revolutionaries, in Benghazi January 21, 2015.

Following a second national electoral loss in 2014 and the formation of an anti-Islamist front, Libya's Islamists determined it was time to change tactics. They split from the internationally recognized government to form a competing government based in Tripoli, made up of a mixture of Islamists and non-Islamist militias from the coastal city of Misrata. Under the appropriated name of the previous government, the General National Congress (GNC), the group has pushed the elected government back to the country's east in what could best be described as a partial coup. As a result, Libya is now divided—Islamists exercise influence in Tripoli, and the internationally recognized government works out of Tobruk. The United Nations has tried to cajole both sides into forming a Government of National Accord, for which there is some hope, but many obstacles. The more the United Nations pressed for peace, the more Tripoli pressed for

concessions—even threatening to open the floodgates for Libyan migrants toward Europe. All the while, the militias associated with the government in Tripoli have been shuttling fighters to the frontlines of Syria to fight the Assad regime. There is strong reason to suspect that these flights are moving ISIS fighters back to Libya as well.

At the start of the UN-mediated reconciliation process in late 2014, ISIS had but a thin presence, consisting mostly of a group of self-proclaimed affiliates in the coastal town of Derna. By the close of talks in 2015, ISIS had taken advantage of the political vacuum and strategic alliances with Islamists, to relocate to Qaddafi's hometown of Sirte, and spread both east and west. Its numbers have grown to 4,000–6,000 fighters, according to various estimates, and perhaps many more. The group maintains camps in the west of the country, from which it has launched a series of deadly attacks on Tunisia. It has also taken aim at Libya's oil infrastructure.

BACK TO BENGHAZI

Back in the United States, many inside the beltway continued to see the Benghazi attack as an isolated event. The true motive behind the siege, however, was to push Washington and the West out of Libya. The orchestrators of the attack used its ambiguous nature and the chaos of the day as a weapon: The true agents behind the Benghazi siege are still not completely known, and the hyper-partisan environment in Washington has only furthered the confusion over the attack's broader meaning. Both Democrats and Republicans ignored signs that Benghazi could devolve into chaos. In off-the-record conversations after his tour as U.S. envoy to Benghazi, and before his confirmation as ambassador, U.S. Ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens expressed to me this precise fear that that Benghazi's devolution into chaos would take down Libya as a whole.

During the first Democratic primary debate, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said she believed that U.S. President Barack Obama had made the right decision when Washington chose to intervene in Libya, and that the United States had helped moderates win the first free elections in Libya since its independence in 1951. Despite a large body of literature arguing otherwise, both assertions are resoundingly true. The real question, however, is what happened to the moderates that had support from the United States and the Libyan electorate. The Benghazi attack should have sent a clear message that Libyan politics were about to collapse. The fact that it didn't underscores the strategic brilliance of the Benghazi attack: The attackers created enough chaos to leave all sides pointing the finger at one another, freeing the true culprits to exert their power elsewhere. The West's gross failures in Libya lay in not conditioning military support during the revolution upon active cooperation with the West post-revolution, not providing substantial reconstruction and disarmament assistance, and grossly overestimating how much outside power the Islamist groups had available to them.

And despite what years of rancor in Congress may have demonstrated, neither Democrats nor Republicans are uniquely to blame for the Benghazi attacks, nor is either party responsible for Libya's collapse. Both parties contributed to the discord that followed in its wake at different times.

The imperative now, as it has been for some time, is to correctly diagnose the problem, and face complicated facts about Benghazi: Without this, we are doomed to repeat the same policies that will inevitably enable ISIS to spread in Africa. Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia face the same threats to stability that Libya experiences today. If Libya falls to Islamist rule, much of North Africa will likely follow. And if the past is any indication, moderates will not determine these nations' futures either.

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Russia's Line in the Sand on Syria

Why Moscow Wants To Halt the Arab Spring

Dmitri Trenin

Syria is often called Russia's last remaining ally in the Middle East, and Moscow's continuing refusal to support the United States, the European Union, and the Arab League in condemning the Assad regime certainly appears to support that claim. The reasons cited for Russia's allegiance to Damascus are many: Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad are said to have a sort of autocratic solidarity, with Putin afraid that the Arab Spring encourages challenges to his own rule; at the same time, Russia is thought to have major economic interests in Syria, including arms contracts, a Russian-leased naval base, and

plans for nuclear energy cooperation.

There are elements of truth in all these assertions -- but they offer only glimpses of the broader picture. Moscow's position on Syria is shaped even more by the recent experience of Libya, strong doubts concerning the Syrian opposition, and suspicions about the motives of the United States.

Damascus was Moscow's ally in the Cold War, when the Soviet Union was engaged in a confrontation with the United States, Israel, and "imperialism" writ large. Under Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, the Soviets equipped and trained the Syrian military. Although the elder Assad was difficult to control and managed to get more from the Kremlin than the other way around, he could be relied upon not to bolt to Washington's side, as did Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Beginning in 1973, after Egypt's disastrous defeat in the war against Israel and Sadat's embrace of U.S. mediation, Syria became the centerpiece of the entire Soviet position in the region, remaining so through the end of the Cold War.

The Russia that emerged from the Soviet collapse had hardly any geopolitical ambitions in the Middle East. In 1972, preparing for his political break with Moscow, Sadat sent home 20,000 Soviet military advisers and their dependents. Four decades later, in February 2011, as Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, was toppled, some 40,000 Russian vacationers were stranded in the Egyptian cities of Hurghada and Sharm el-Sheikh. This, in a nutshell, reveals the difference between the Soviet and Russian involvement in the Middle East: A region where the Soviets once showed off their military muscle and influenced political developments had become a place for ordinary Russians to go for a visa-free budget vacation and a suntan.

Syria somewhat bucked this trend: Its continued relationship with post-Soviet Russia was largely due to the fact that Syria

needed arms and Assad did not trust the United States. Today, Russia's material interests in Syria are real, though limited. Damascus continues to purchase a wide range of Russian arms, from tanks to aircraft and air defenses, but Syria does not represent a big or particularly lucrative market for these exports. In order to sell its armaments, Russia has had to extend credit to Syria and forgive Damascus its multibillion-dollar debt to the Soviet Union. When Russian President Dmitry Medvedev visited Damascus in 2010, he offered to build a nuclear reactor in Syria, but that work has not even started. And Moscow maintains a naval resupply facility at the Syrian port of Tartus, which it last used a few weeks ago, when the Russian navy's only aircraft carrier was sailing from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. These bilateral interests are supported by the personal connections between Russian military officers, arms traders, and diplomats and senior members of the Assad regime.

But these shared interests are not the only reasons why Russia has been unwilling to join the West in condemning Assad at the UN Security Council. Moscow has learned its lesson from how events unfolded in Libya last year. It abstained during the crucial UN vote on intervention in Libya, thus allowing the adoption of the resolution calling for a no-fly zone over Libya, which was meant to prevent an impending massacre in Benghazi. The Russian government wanted to help its partners in the United States and Europe, whom Russia needs for its plans for economic modernization. To be sure, Russia did have some material interests in Libya -- contracts for military arms and railroad contracts -- but it certainly did not want to be seen as Muammar al-Qaddafi's defender.

The NATO no-fly zone soon led to an offshore war against the Qaddafi regime. As Russian officials argued, vicious as the Qaddafi government may have been, the war's long agony resulted in a number of deaths among civilians, if not so much

in Benghazi, as once feared, then in Tripoli and in Qaddafi strongholds such as Sirte. As Moscow sees it, the foreign militaries that intervened bear at least some responsibility for those deaths. And so far, the new Libyan regime has proved far less secular than the one it replaced, with some of its leaders suspected of having links to al Qaeda. It also has been unable to control Qaddafi's abandoned arsenals, or even preserve unity in its own ranks. What was billed as a revolution seemed to many in Moscow to be a civil war that replaced a dictatorship with chaos.

But Libya has always been peripheral to Middle Eastern geopolitics. Syria, however, is different. A civil war there, which has in effect already begun, could unsettle the entire region, above all in Lebanon but also in Jordan and Iraq. Israel, too, may be affected should Damascus encourage Palestinian militants or Hezbollah fighters to attack Israeli settlements or outposts. Iran, Syria's ally, is already being drawn into the fray, with the Assad regime's Alawite core coming under attack from mainly Sunni opposition. Syria is Bahrain in reverse -- a Sunni majority that feels oppressed by a relatively small sect that many believe is closer to the Shiites. Recent events in Syria and Bahrain have caused the regional divide between Sunnis and Shiites to become more pronounced, heralding a possible clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As strategists in Moscow see it, the conflict in Syria, the sectarian violence in Iraq, and the aborted revolution in Bahrain are the proxy battlefields where the struggle for regional primacy is being fought.

As a result, where much of the Western world now sees a case for human rights and democracy, and where the Soviets in their day would have spotted national liberation movements or the rise of the masses, most observers in Moscow today see geopolitics. Russian government officials and commentators close to them explain Western behavior in rather cynical terms: Washington let go of a long-time ally, Mubarak, in

order to retain influence in Egypt, waged a war in Libya to keep oil contracts, and ignored the Saudi intervention in Bahrain because the U.S. Fifth Fleet is based there. And now, the United States is trying to topple Assad to rob Iran of its sole ally in the Arab world. The Russians themselves have no dogs in these fights, but they do not want to bandwagon on a U.S. regional strategy that they believe is a losing and dangerous proposition.

For all their outward coolness, Russia's foreign policy strategists continue to be preoccupied with the United States, watching its every move. They were unpleasantly surprised when the United States decided to intervene in Libya and are now suspicious of U.S. plans for Syria. The Kremlin is concerned about a war between the United States and Iran, which is visibly drawing closer. Moreover, with all the problems Moscow faces in the perpetually troubled North Caucasus (and the threat of violent destabilization it may one day face in Central Asia), Russia does not relish the prospect of more conflict in the Muslim world should the United States -- alone or with its allies -- strike again in the Middle East. The forthcoming U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the likely return of the Taliban to Kabul already present enough worries.

Russia is not blameless: It lost too much time watching others and then criticizing them without shaping an active role for itself. Late last month, Moscow invited the Syrian government and the opposition for talks. This move came much too late. The opposition wants to hang Assad, not negotiate with him. Perhaps last year the response might have been different.

Yet Moscow chose not to use even the limited influence it had with its supposed ally in Damascus. Inaction has had its price: Over the last year, Russia has faced the simultaneous opprobrium of the Western public, the Arab street, and the conservative Gulf regimes. And now it has maneuvered itself

into a position in which it must bet on Assad's survival to protect its interests. Moscow needs to learn that saying no is not good enough and that in global politics timing is everything.

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Assad Family Values

How the Son Learned to Quash a Rebellion From His Father

Patrick Seale

Ever since the Baath Party came to power in Syria in 1963, it has faced a challenge from the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic militants. These Islamists were -- and still are -- bitterly opposed to the Baath Party's secular policies and to the prominence in its leadership of Syria's minorities, notably Alawis, whom extremist Sunnis consider heretics.

The smoldering resentment burst into open conflict during the 30-year rule (1970-2000) of Hafez al-Assad, and again during the rule of his son, Bashar, who took over the presidency after his father's death. In February 1982, Hafez al-Assad put down a rebellion in the city of Hama by his

Islamist opponents. Three decades later, in February 2012, Bashar al-Assad faced down a rebellion in Homs, a sister city of Hama in the central Syrian plain. Both responded with great brutality to these regime-threatening uprisings, as if aware that they and their community would face no mercy if the Islamists were ever to come to power.

These two epoch-making events were remarkably similar. Both Hafez and Bashar had been slow to recognize and address the groundswell of complaint against rising poverty, corruption, and government neglect that would fuel the uprisings. Preoccupied with foreign affairs, they failed to pay sufficient attention to the domestic scene, often turning a blind eye to the abuses and profiteering of their close associates, including members of their own family. More fundamentally, both Hafez and Bashar believed in those moments of crisis that they were wrestling not only with internal dissent but with a large-scale American and Israeli conspiracy to unseat them, backed by some of their Arab enemies.

In Hafez al-Assad's mind, his physical battle with Islamist guerrillas was an extension of his long, unsuccessful struggle with Israel and the United States over the nature of the political settlement after the October War of 1973 -- a war that Hafez al-Assad and Egypt's leader Anwar al-Sadat waged together against Israel with the aim of regaining territory captured by Israel in the 1967 war. Once the war was over, Hafez al-Assad had bitterly opposed Henry Kissinger's 1975 Sinai disengagement agreement, which removed Egypt from the confrontation with Israel. Similarly, he interpreted the U.S.-sponsored Camp David Accords of 1978, and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of the following year, as a conspiracy to leave the Arab world defenseless in the face of Israeli power. This was only the latest, as he saw it, in a long string of Western plots to divide and enfeeble the Arabs, dating back to World War I.

In much the same way, Bashar al-Assad's immediate reaction to the uprising of this past year was to view it as the domestic wing of a foreign conspiracy by the United States, Israel, and some Arab states to bring down his regime and Iran's as well -- and with them the whole Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah axis, which, he believed, was the only real obstacle to American and Israeli hegemony.

The foreign conspiracies with which Hafez and Bashar have had to deal were, without doubt, very real. America's unflagging support for Israel -- including an airlift of weapons during the October War -- put the Arab armies at a grave disadvantage, while Kissinger's diplomacy removed the most powerful Arab state from the Arab lineup, allowing Israel the freedom to invade Lebanon in 1982 and remain there for 18 years. But focusing on foreign conspiracies blinded both Hafez and Bashar to the legitimate grievances of their angry populations, and caused them to overreact, using excessive force when putting down their domestic opponents.

Hafez and Bashar both accused their foreign enemies of supplying the insurgents with sophisticated American-made communications equipment, as well as with weapons and cash. In 1982, the regime confiscated some 15,000 machine guns. Last month, when the regime regained control of the Baba Amr quarter of Homs, it also claimed to have captured a rich haul of foreign-supplied weapons and equipment.

There were differences, however, in the trajectories leading up to the deadly uprisings. In Bashar's case, the revolution began as peaceful urban protests. In his father's case, it began with a campaign of assassinations of important men close to him, and other acts of extreme violence. One of the most dramatic of these was the gunning down of 83 Alawi officer cadets at the Aleppo Artillery School in June of 1979. From their safe haven deep in the ancient warrens of Aleppo and Hama, where cars could not enter, the guerrillas

emerged repeatedly to bomb and kill.

Between 1979 and 1981, terrorists killed more than 300 people in Aleppo, mainly Baathists and Alawis. In response, the security forces killed some 2,000 Muslim opponents over the same period, and thousands more were rounded up and thrown into jail, where they were often beaten and tortured.

Having failed to bring down the government by assassinations, the Islamist insurgents then attempted the bolder strategy of organizing large-scale urban uprisings in cities across the country. The uprisings culminated in the Islamists' seizure of Hama in early February 1982, when hundreds of fighters rose from their hiding places and slaughtered some 70 leading Baathists overnight. The triumphant guerrillas declared the city liberated.

With Bashar al-Assad it was the other way around: the uprising against his rule started a year ago, with large urban demonstrations. It was only when the regime responded with live fire that the opposition took up arms and started carrying out hit-and-run attacks, ambushes, and assassinations against soldiers, policemen, and government targets. The showdown culminated in the rebel Free Syrian Army's seizure of the Baba Amr quarter of Homs. They were aided by jihadists smuggled in from Iraq, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia.

In 1982, it took three grim weeks for the regime to regain control of Hama and hunt down the insurgents. Some 10,000 people were killed. In 2012, the battle for Homs lasted nearly a month. As at Hama 30 years ago, there was heavy collateral damage and great suffering by the local population, which was deprived of food, water, and fuel during a harsh winter. Having routed the rebels at Homs, Bashar has now sent his army to bombard and overrun other rebel strongpoints, notably at Idlib, in the north of the country.

So far, in the rebellion against Bashar, the Muslim Brotherhood seems to have been the main recipient of weapons and financing from Libya, Qatar, and elsewhere. Although they do not seem to be one cohesive group, but, rather, four or five different currents with different external backers, these Islamist guerrillas operate under the umbrella of the opposition Syrian National Council based in Turkey. They certainly seem to have been involved, together with army defectors and freelance fighters, in the battle for Baba Amr. Most observers agree that the Muslim Brotherhood is the best-organized and the best-funded of all the opposition factions. Still more extreme than the Muslim Brotherhood, al Qaeda jihadists, smuggled in from neighboring countries, also appear to have entered the battle in recent months, and to have been responsible for a number of suicide bombings of government targets. Ayman al-Zawahiri, who took over the leadership of al Qaeda after Osama bin Laden's death, has called for a global jihad against the Syrian regime.

The long campaign of terror against Hafez al-Assad from 1976 to 1982 was political insanity. By defeating it, Hafez won himself nearly two more decades of rule. Similarly, the arming of the opposition against Bashar al-Assad seems not to have advanced the opposition's cause but to have given the regime the justification for crushing it.

The regime's victory at Homs has opened a new phase in the crisis, in which negotiations, presided over by Kofi Annan, the former UN secretary-general, might now be given a chance. Annan has been mandated by both the Arab League and the United Nations to bring about a ceasefire and create the conditions for a dialogue between the regime and its opponents. He has condemned the arming of the opposition and declared that his immediate goal is to stop the killing.

Although the regime's onslaught continues and armed rebels refuse to put down their guns, there is yet a slim chance that

Annan may succeed. In both camps there are men who now realize that there can be no military solution to the crisis -- either in Syria or in Iran. Indeed, Annan's Syrian venture is mirrored by the efforts of the EU foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, to open a dialogue with Iran. The peacemakers should be given a chance. But there are still plenty of hawks about -- in the United States, in Israel, and in some European and Arab capitals -- who dream of regime change in Tehran and Damascus, and will be content with nothing less.

Both Hafiz and Bashar used brute force to crush their opponents. Hafiz -- widely feared and admired -- triumphed over his enemies and ruled for 30 years, until his death from natural causes. Bashar, more fallible, enigmatic, and perplexing than his father, is clearly not cast in the traditional mold of an Arab leader. He has managed to survive the yearlong uprising, but it seems unlikely that he will equal his father's record.

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Why Washington Didn't Intervene In Syria Last Time

Comparing 1982 to 2012

Richard W. Murphy

Syria's regime has changed little since the days of Hafiz al-Assad, the father of the current president, Bashar al-Assad. But the U.S. handling of Syria today contrasts sharply with Washington's behavior in the past. In the period with which I am most familiar, from 1974, when the embassy reopened after being closed for seven years following the Six-Day War and I became U.S. ambassador to Syria, until Hafiz al-Assad's death in 2000, the United States was little concerned with Assad's repressive domestic policies.

Assad came to power in 1970 after spending years rising through the ranks of the Syrian Air Force and the Baath Party, which had seized control of Syria in 1963. Once in office, he proceeded to build up the security services, which eventually came to consist of some 15 to 17 (often competing) forces. He controlled the senior appointments of each service and ensured that they all funneled their reports -- including reports on his citizens' movements and moods -- to his office. He ruled with a firm hand, and when, in the 1980s, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood intensified its campaign of violence against him, he authorized an unprecedented harsh response: the shelling of the city of Hama, the group's headquarters, in 1982. The campaign left at least 10,000 Syrians dead.

At the time, the United States said very little about the Hama shelling, and there was no suggestion that the United States intervene. Had we attempted to do so, Assad would have vigorously resisted and the Arab world would have joined him in rejecting an American-organized effort against the regime. From 1974 until the regional upheavals last spring, the United States was pursuing other interests in Syria.

Throughout Hafiz Assad's presidency, it was Syria's foreign policy that most concerned the United States. Primarily, Washington worked to bring about Assad's support for the Arab-Israeli peace process. After the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war, as Egyptian President Anwar Sadat promoted closer relations with Israel, Assad methodically molded Syria's role as leader of the Arab Steadfastness and Confrontation Front. He maintained that a united Arab world was the only way to confront Israel and to create a durable peace.

In 1974, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger mediated a Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights, which restored to Syria control over a slice of territory that it had lost to Israel in 1973. Assad expected this

to be the first among many such arrangements to restore Syria's 1967 borders. No such thing would happen. The Israelis concentrated on making peace with Egypt and, over the years, only periodically turned to Syria when they needed a foil to peace negotiations with the Palestinians.

For several years, Assad rejected U.S. attempts to move toward a peace agreement without an advance guarantee of total return of Syria's land. He maintained that getting the basic support of both peoples for a peace agreement would take a generation. Only in the late 1980s was he prepared to state publicly that he would support "a peace of the brave," and even then, to the general dissatisfaction of the United States and Israel, gave virtually no detail on his vision of what that peace would involve.

The second major American concern in Syria was the country's involvement in the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war. In 1976, after Beirut asked for Syrian military support against the Palestinian Liberation Army, Assad sent in troops, carefully observing Israeli strictures on the areas of their deployment. Once installed, the Syrians overstayed their welcome, and their presence came to be widely condemned as an occupation. In the course of the 1990s the United States imposed financial sanctions on the country, expanding a sanctions regime that eventually also targeted Damascus for its weapons of mass destruction programs, association with al Qaeda and the Taliban, and corruption.

The Syrians finally left Lebanon in 2005, after a public outcry over the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, which, many Lebanese believe, was instigated by the Syrian leadership. American criticism showed Washington's mounting unhappiness with Syrian policymakers and their system of governance. This discontent, however, still did not extend to intervening in Syria's domestic policies.

Bashar Assad, who succeeded his father in 2000, brought a more outgoing personality and apparent interest in reforms. Syrians and the West initially hoped that he would fulfill that promise, but hope for reform soon faded. In contrast to his father, who made few promises but kept his word, Bashar was quick to promise reforms but failed to implement them. He took some steps to liberalize the economy, but the Baath Party, which had long since become mostly just a regime mouthpiece and a corrupt patronage network, retained its monopoly of power. He jailed political moderates who pushed for government reforms, and the reign of the security services continued unchallenged.

Bashar continued to engage in talks about peace with Israel for a few years in talks led by Turkey, but in the meantime Washington had become more concerned with Syria's long-standing friendship with Iran. Cultivated originally by Hafiz Assad as a function of his rivalry with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the Syrian-Iranian relationship had, over the years, brought Damascus significant investment, trade, and political support. In Washington, the talk was of the need to wean Syria from its ties with Iran. Doing so was seen as a way to deliver a strategic setback to Iran.

Then came the Arab Spring. After the relatively bloodless departures of Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and the successful fight to unseat Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi, many assumed that Assad's fall was inevitable and imminent. From the very early days, Damascus maintained that all demonstrations were the work of imperialist thugs and Zionist terrorists and deserved the harshest possible destruction. In the southern town of Dera'a, where the regime arrested and reportedly tortured teenage graffiti writers, to the intensive shelling of Homs, Idlib, and other centers of resistance, Bashar reacted with the brutality that his father had displayed in 1982 but this time, thanks to amateur video makers within Syria and the new

communications media of Facebook and Twitter, the world was watching.

Last August, President Barack Obama called on Assad to step aside. The regime repeated its accusations that the wave of demonstrations and violence was caused by outside agents of imperialism and Zionism. That played well with many Syrians, who have a highly developed sense of conspiracy politics and victimization at the hands of foreign powers. Washington then welcomed the Arab League's initiative to send a monitoring mission to the country and its referral of the Syrian situation to the Security Council. As the violence spiraled, Washington recalled its ambassador, as it had in 1986 and 2005. The Obama administration left behind no staff but at the same time made clear its opposition to arming the Syrian rebels, who had initially pursued peaceful demonstrations but some of whom, when faced with heavy artillery and tanks, decided that only armed rebellion would have any chance of success.

Washington hopes that whenever the Assad regime is replaced, it will be by leadership guaranteeing a multiparty political structure and a foreign policy free of Iranian influence. What Washington can do to advance those goals is, however, very much in question. Russia and China vetoed a draft United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Syria that would have given a measure of hope to the opposition and pause to the regime.

President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have spoken out repeatedly against Syria's repression of its own citizens, but as yet there is no sign that their words, or those from any other quarter, are having an impact. Assad's reaction to the unrest has primarily been to apply more force. He benefits from the fact that the Syrian opposition remains highly fragmented, and that to train an effective military force to confront that of his regime would be time-consuming and difficult.

Washington is helping shape a more coherent political opposition. But U.S. policymakers must keep clearly in mind that the regime has its supporters in all walks of life and across Syria's religious communities. Over the last 40 years, the Assad family built a reputation for safeguarding the country's minorities and for providing a predictable (if repressed) life for Syrians. Its policies have created both resistance to change and inertia.

Washington was long irritated by Syrian criticisms of Egypt over its peace treaty with Israel, by Damascus' support for Iranian nurturing of Hezbollah and Hamas, and by Syria's own prolonged military presence in Lebanon. It took the Arab Spring and the United States' worry about Iran's nuclear program to bring all of these resentments into focus. There have been defections from the Syrian military. However, unless these increase massively or there is a coup from within the Syrian military ranks, the prospect of prolonged confrontation and bloodshed in Syria is likely.

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Alawites for Assad

Why the Syrian Sect Backs the Regime

Leon Goldsmith

Since the start of the revolt in Syria, the country's Alawites have been instrumental in maintaining President Bashar al-Assad's hold on power. A sect of Shia Islam, the Alawites comprise roughly 13 percent of the population and form the bulk of Syria's key military units, intelligence services, and ultra-loyalist militias, called shabiha ("ghosts" in Arabic). As the uprising in Syria drags on, there are signs that some Alawites are beginning to move away from the regime. But most continue to fight for Assad -- largely out of fear that the Sunni community will seek revenge for past and present atrocities not only against him but also against Alawites as a group. This sense of vulnerability feeding Alawite loyalty is rooted in the sect's history.

The Alawites split from Shia Islam in ninth-century Iraq over their belief in the divinity of the fourth Islamic caliph, Ali bin Abi Talib, a position branded as heresy by the Sunnis and extremist by most Shias. The community began as a small collection of believers, and over the following centuries it suffered almost constant discrimination and several massacres at the hands of Sunni Muslims. In 1305, for example, following a clerical fatwa, Sunni Mamluks wiped out the Alawite community of the Kisrawan (modern Lebanon). As late as the mid-nineteenth century, in retaliation for the rebellion of an Alawite sheikh, the Ottomans ruthlessly persecuted the Alawites, burning villages and farms across what little territory they held.

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Despite this long-standing persecution, the Alawites fought to integrate into modern Syria. In 1936, as the French mandate waned, Alawite religious leaders convinced their anxious followers to incorporate themselves into the new, overwhelmingly Sunni, Syrian state. Over the next several decades, Alawites moved away from the mountains to pursue educational and employment opportunities in the cities. Between 1943 and 1957, Alawite migration tripled the population of Hama, and between 1957 and 1979 it quadrupled the size of Latakia.

Many Alawites also joined the military. Since Ottoman times, Sunni Arabs had largely spurned army careers, but Alawites welcomed the opportunity for stable income. By 1963, they made up 65 percent of noncommissioned officers in the Syrian army. The rise of Alawites in Syrian society throughout the 1960s was assisted by political infighting among the Sunnis and the Baath Party coup of 1963, which united

working-class Alawites and Sunnis under one banner.

Although Sunnis initially tolerated the growing clout of the Alawite community, resentment resurfaced when Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite and the father of the current president, seized power in 1970. When he proposed a new constitution three years later that mandated a secular state and allowed the presidency to be awarded to a non-Muslim, Sunnis protested across the country. In early 1976, with religious tensions flaring, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood launched its uprising against what it called the “heretic” Alawite regime. The Alawites, harboring their long-standing fear of rejection and persecution by the Sunni community, rallied around Assad. The two sides hardened for battle, and over the next six years Assad relied on his sect to beat back the Brotherhood revolt.

In February 1982, the struggle reached its climax in Sunni-dominated Hama. Seeking to end the rebellion, Assad massacred the Sunni population of the city, killing as many as 20,000 residents. Alawites blamed the Muslim Brotherhood for the disaster, largely convinced that Sunnis had and would always reject their efforts to integrate. Even liberal Alawites, who criticized Assad’s aggressiveness at the outset of the revolt, remained silent in the aftermath of the Hama massacre. They had been transformed from victims into perpetrators.

Since the Hama slaughter of 1982, the Alawites have consolidated their control of the country. According to the Syria scholar Radwan Ziadeh, they comprise the vast majority of Syria’s roughly 700,000 security and intelligence personnel and military officer core. In fact, they constitute so much of the country’s security apparatus that Syrians are said to often put on an Alawite accent when apprehended by intelligence officers in the hope of receiving better treatment.

The Alawites' loyalty to Assad today is hardly assured, however. Despite popular notions of a rich, privileged Alawite class dominating Syria, the country's current regime provides little tangible benefit to most Alawite citizens. Rural Alawites have struggled as a result of cuts in fuel subsidies and new laws restricting the sale of tobacco -- their primary crop for centuries. Indeed, since the provision of basic services by the first Assad in the 1970s and 1980s, most Alawite villages -- with the exception of Qardaha, the home of Assad's tribe, the Kalbiyya -- have developed little. Donkeys remain a common form of transport for many, and motor vehicles are scarce, with dilapidated minibuses offering the only way to commute to the cities for work.

Some Alawites are explicitly breaking ranks. Last September, for example, three prominent Alawite sheikhs, Mohib Nisafi, Yassin Hussein, and Mussa Mansour, issued a joint statement declaring their "innocence from these atrocities carried out by Bashar al-Assad and his aides, who belong to all religious sects." According to Monzer Makhouz, an Alawite member of the Syrian National Council, a leading opposition group, Alawites are joining protests in the coastal cities of the Alawite territory. And in recent weeks, evidence has emerged of defections of Alawite soldiers and intelligence officers, seemingly from less privileged Alawite tribes, who have described themselves as "Free Alawites" and called for other Alawites to join them.

The fall of Assad presents several possible scenarios for the Alawites. It could launch a comprehensive reconciliation process, drive them back to their mountain refuge in northwestern Syria, or lead to open conflict with the Sunnis. No matter what, the Alawites face a dilemma. If Assad collapses, the community will have to fend off the criticisms of supporting the regime for this long. Sticking with Assad may increase the odds of an unforgiving Sunni retribution, but it at least keeps the sectarian conflict at bay -- that is, as long as

Assad remains.

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Ramadan in Aleppo

A Letter From Rebel-Controlled Syria

Michael Weiss

UMIT BEKTAS/COURTESY REUTERS

A portrait of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at the Bab al-Salam border crossing to Turkey.

"Don't even think about going to sleep tonight."

My fixer, Mahmoud Elzour, shot me a wry smile from the corner of a rooftop patio in a safe house in al-Bab, a town about 27 miles north of Aleppo that was recently liberated by Syrian rebels. It was already two o'clock in the morning, and the predawn meal that was supposed to get us through the Ramadan day ahead was being served by our host, Abu Ali. With his large frame and close-cropped brown hair, he could easily have been mistaken for a defensive tackle for the

Miami Dolphins. We were surrounded by a gracious fraternity of activists, relatives of Abu Ali, and rebel fighters, among them one military defector and about four civilians. Earlier that evening, we had made a touch-and-go border crossing from Kilis, Turkey, and then drove for an hour along the completely quiet roadways leading from the border to al-Bab. The only military presence we encountered was a single Free Syrian Army (FSA) checkpoint. So after all this, sleeping had never occurred to me. "We will go to Aleppo at four and leave at noon," Mahmoud said. Was it safe? "Of course. I would not take you there if it wasn't, habibi." Another smile.

Reedy and bespectacled, Mahmoud is a 52-year-old Syrian who spent the last two decades in Atlanta. A few months ago, he sold most of his successful construction-vehicle dealership to move to Antakya, Turkey, where many Syrian fighters have formed an ad hoc base. Once there, he started financing his own rebel battalion. The day before our jaunt into Syria, he had returned from a fierce battle in central Aleppo that culminated in the rebels' overrunning two police stations and defeating a group of shabiha, mercenary civilian thugs employed by the regime, from the pro-Assad Barri tribe. Some members of the tribe were later summarily executed, and a gruesome video of the incident appalled even pro-opposition Syrians. Mahmoud took no part in the executions, but he did participate in a raid on one of the police stations. Rebels blew up the ground floor with with a bomb that had been fashioned, Mahmoud said, out of an old water boiler. The officers inside had been offered amnesty and safe passage if they quit their posts, but after hearing the scream of fighter jets overhead and mistakenly believing that reinforcements were on the way, they angrily refused. So the rebels invaded, killing anyone who fired back.

WAR OF ATTRITION

After nearly 18 months, with over 20,000 dead and millions

more directly affected, the Syrian revolution has become the foreign policy preoccupation of every Western and Arab government. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's few remaining allies -- China, Iran, and Russia -- show no sign of acceding to the aspirations of the Syrian people. And so what started out as a movement for economic reform, and was met with great violence, has now morphed into an armed insurgency, consisting overwhelmingly of civilians aiming to end the regime through force.

The Obama administration still professes not to know who the Syrian rebels are, even as busloads of foreign correspondents do the work of the Central Intelligence Agency in profiling them. The White House fears that the rebels' ranks have been infiltrated by extremist or sectarian groups, most notoriously al Qaeda, and thus is wary of committing money and arms to their cause. Some analysts cite this restraint as proof of the administration's prudence rather than of an incoherence that risks damning Syria to Washington's self-fulfilling prophecies. Those opposed to U.S. intervention warned that it would inevitably breed jihadism, sectarianism, and regional instability -- all of which have already come to pass. Meanwhile, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have had no such qualms about backing the opposition, albeit selectively and to further their own ideological interests. The rebels, for their part, have not equivocated in their call for outside help, giving weekly protests such names as "No-Fly Zone Friday." It is the West's hearts and minds that need winning over.

On the ground, however, the geopolitics of the struggle takes a back seat to more exigent considerations. The real story continues to be the unraveling of four decades of dynastic totalitarian rule. As horrifying as the carnage has been, the resilience of some segments of Syrian society leaves no doubt that the regime is finished. In parts of the country, an alternative to Assad's rule is already being joyously experienced and seen as worth dying for.

Still, nobody can predict with certainty when and how the House of Assad will fall. For all the braggadocio I heard from the Syrian rebels ("We will take Aleppo in no more than ten days"), their congenial shrugs over specifics revealed them to be far more interested in fighting a long war of attrition than in planning any well-timed march on Damascus. They can withstand losing a city street here, or a whole neighborhood there, because even in tactical defeat they cost the regime money, ammunition, and men. The rebels learn from their setbacks, too. In February, it took a month of brutal artillery bombardment and some 7,000 soldiers for the regime to retake Baba Amr, just one district in the city of Homs. The FSA had about 400 men, most of whom retreated when they ran out of bullets. Mark the sequel in Aleppo.

THE FREE SYRIAN STREET SWEEPERS

The chaotic news reports out of Syria do not prepare you for the eerie calm in the rural north of the country. Travel 50 miles from the border, and you'll barely realize you've left Turkey: Farmers drive along the main road in their tractors, many greeting you with a wave or a honk.

Such was the scene in al-Bab, at least when I arrived there two weeks ago. Since the start of the Syrian uprising, about 92 people have been killed there, 45 of them in the last month alone, after government forces started shelling the area. But when I came to this city of around 200,000 people, it was solidly under rebel control, thanks to the sacking of the nearby military camp that had carried out the shelling. The opposition fighters had even captured a few tanks. Within days, the makings of a civil society could already be glimpsed, especially at night. It was then that locals and rebels poured out into the streets, trading their cell phones and Kalashnikov rifles for garbage bags, white gloves, and brooms. Here were the Free Syrian Street Sweepers. Boys as young as 12 were at work all around the city picking up the day's trash or, in some

cases, clearing rubble left after the siege.

One young boy told me he was on cleanup duty because for his whole life (and decades before that, too) to do anything spontaneous or willful in Syria required government permission. Another joked that the garbage bag in his hand was where he wanted Assad to go. The main boulevard was colored by minibuses emblazoned with the pre-Baathist Syrian flag -- rebranded the "independence" flag -- and pro-FSA slogans. Flashing headlights and loud horns gave the street an ecstatic energy that seemed completely at odds with the grinding and bloody civil war raging elsewhere. At a surprisingly chic hookah café with leather sofas and a plasma television, locals watched international news channels into the early hours of the morning. The strawberry smoothies were first-rate.

Yet the makings of a civil society are not the same thing as an actual civil society. As a recent video circulating on the Internet appears to show, during the siege of al-Bab, rebels threw the corpses of regime personnel off the rooftop of a post-office building that government forces were using as a security headquarters. Al-Bab opposition activists have since claimed that the bodies belonged to snipers who had killed seven rebels. They have also condemned the act and said that the identities of those who threw the bodies off the roof are not yet known. Still, this video is yet another reminder that Syria is a brutalized society. Even as some rebels try to act responsibly by adopting a martial code of conduct or putting their captives on trial before meting out punishment, they must overcome fear, sectarianism, and a deep-rooted sense of tribal justice. Lucky is the revolution in which the ennobling desire for freedom vanquishes the rebarbative impulse for vengeance.

Al-Bab is home to roughly 400 rebels and headquarters to one of the armed opposition's many Abu Bakr brigades, named for

the Prophet Muhammad's father-in-law. Local merchants support the fighters with "salaries," a charismatic 32-year-old activist named Barry told me in the hookah café, in the amount of 5,000 Syrian lira ($100) per month. No money had come from outside the city. I asked Barry if the Syrian National Council, the largest umbrella group of opposition figures, which has been partially recognized by the United States, was sending aid of any kind into al-Bab. "No, no," he laughed. "They want someone [to] go there and -- I don't know the word -- 'please give me some money.'" To beg? "Yes, to beg."

Al-Bab has not seen help from the United States, either. When I asked a local activist, Muhammad Rajaf, what he thought of U.S. President Barack Obama, he made a derisive flapping gesture with his hand. "Obama . . . we see, talk, talk, talk. Don't see work." He had a higher opinion of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Barry agreed, saying that the only countries a post-Assad Syria would have positive relations with were Turkey, Libya, and Tunisia, because all had contributed materially to the revolution. I then asked about the foreign fighters, some of them radical Islamists, who had reportedly infiltrated the Syrian opposition. Barry did not deny their existence, but he thought that the much-hyped menace of al Qaeda was one of the regime's greatest propaganda achievements. "Where are the terrorists here? You're with us now," he said to me, "so you can be the first Jewish-Christian member of al Qaeda." That did not mean that outside support for the revolution was necessarily secular or pluralistic. Barry called Saudi Arabia an enemy for its exclusive funding of Syrian Salafists, most of whom are based in the northwestern province of Idlib. "They want us to work with the Saudi agenda. We will not. We are a free people now." And free people, Barry said, need a free election. "At that time, I will accept the Salafi, the Ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood], the liberal, anybody who wins fairly."

Until that election, though, the task of governing rebel-controlled territory is a tricky one. Al-Bab residents are trying to establish an emergency civil council to administer the city while the rest of Syria awaits its own piecemeal liberation. The council, according to Barry, is to be composed of a "first circle" of 21 members to be elected by activists in the city who "have been with the revolution from the first day." The FSA will not be involved, and the same goes for any of the initially nonviolent civilian activists who have since taken up arms. Merchants and latecomers to the revolution -- "the old men," in Barry's coinage -- would have subordinate roles in a "second circle" of councilmen that would be responsible for media, relief, and medical treatment, in effect bringing all of the de facto governing bodies in al-Bab under one heading. It sounded like a nice plan, in theory.

TRIAGE IN AL-BAB

If the FSA does cede authority to al-Bab's civilian-only municipal government, it might be because the militia's priorities lie elsewhere at the moment. Each day, fighters in al-Bab make the 35-minute journey to join the "mother of all battles," as the regime has termed it, now being waged in Aleppo, Syria's most populous city. The regime's unrelenting aerial bombardment campaign, using helicopters and fighter jets, has yet to be matched by an equivalent ground assault. That will come, as Syrians are wont to say, "tomorrow." Last week, the most severe clashes were raging in the neighborhood of Salaheddine, in southwestern Aleppo. In a video that Barry showed me, the neighborhood was a blasted-out ruin with decaying corpses in the street. He had just returned from the area, where he was hit by sniper bullets that ricocheted off the ground and entered his lower back and upper thigh. He had spent a few hours in the al-Bab field hospital (located in the basement of a mosque), got himself stitched up, and was ready to head back into Aleppo.

The field hospital is another testament to the resilience of al-Bab. At around eleven o'clock at night, Ilhan Tanir, a Turkish-American journalist, and I were taken there on motorbike to meet the volunteer staff members. They were eating in the corner of the expansive, fluorescent-lit center for triage and surgery. The entrance was filled with boxes of medical supplies, all moved from the actual hospital, which had been destroyed by regime forces. The room housed a single patient recovering from an unspecified head injury, but I could see traces of earlier casualties, including a dried pool of blood on the floor next to one gurney.

An electrical engineer who asked to be identified as Abdullah Mowahed told us, in perfect English, that it was his responsibility to keep a digital record of every case that passed through the hospital. He opened a laptop and showed me an Excel spreadsheet with the names of the patients, their places of origins, the type of injuries they had sustained, and their status -- civilian, rebel, or regime -- all organized like an accountant's ledger. The staff also recorded videos to document the patients' treatment, and the media team uploaded them to YouTube. One video showed a girl no older than ten whose back was covered by the scattershot rubies of a shrapnel wound; another showed a man whose legs were mangled beyond recognition. These were the victims of the bombardment campaign. "That was a hard time," the male nurse who seemed to administrate everything told us.

I asked about regime fighters treated here. Another volunteer named Muhammad replied that they received the same care as everyone else. "We tell them, 'What you do when you leave is up to you. But if you return to the army, you'll likely be killed because they will assume you've joined the opposition.'" Most, he said, defected or ran away.

Mutiny has been one of Assad's biggest fears since June 2011, when a lieutenant colonel named Hussein Harmoush turned

his guns on regime forces who were firing on unarmed civilians in the northwestern town of Jisr al-Shughour. The majority of soldiers in the Syrian army are Sunnis, and whenever they are deployed into population centers -- usually on orders to fight "terrorists," or even Israelis -- a large bloc of them inevitably defects. As with Stalin's Red Army in World War II, Syrian regulars who make contact with the opposition and do not join their ranks can be held under lethal suspicion. A colonel who defected to Turkey in March told the London-based newspaper Asharq Alawsat: "[I]f an officer is discovered watching a channel other than the official Syrian channel, he will be punished; even when he goes to visit his family, he is allowed only one day, or 'a night.'"

THE MOTHER OF ALL BATTLES

For all the free-flowing traffic, leaving al-Bab is not easy once you arrive. As our party was preparing for our 4:00 AM jaunt into Aleppo, we faced a setback: no gas. After more than a year of U.S. and EU sanctions, not to mention the regime's own version of collective punishment, petrol was selling for $13 per gallon -- that is, for those lucky enough to find any to buy. Rebels have routinely seized gas trucks traveling through Syria, so drivers are reluctant to risk going to work. Not one to give up, Barry had a plan: Rather than head to Aleppo ourselves, we'd join an FSA convoy.

At around 5:30 AM, Abu Ali drove Mahmoud, Barry, Ilhan, and me the short distance from his house to a rebel gathering point at the southern tip of the city. There, we were met by a small war fleet: one pickup truck, an SUV with a mounted machine gun, a sedan (that was our ride), and a white minivan. After some cries of "Allahu Akbar," the convoy got moving.

As with the journey to al-Bab, the main highway leading to Aleppo was void of any regime presence. There were no FSA

checkpoints in sight, either. Civilian vehicles passing us from the other direction honked or waved at the rebels. As we pulled into the liberated parts of Aleppo City, however, the pastoral scenery faded into that of a devastated war zone. The quiet indicated either a long-awaited cessation of violence or a prelude to another attack. Hundreds of thousands of people had fled in the last few weeks -- to other cities or to neighboring countries -- and scores of rebels, civilians, and regime fighters had been killed. At this point, I noticed that the white minivan ahead of us had its side door open -- the rebels inside were ready for anything.

A burned-out and graffiti-covered bus, which Barry claimed had been used to transport shabiha, lay in ruins on the side of the road. Garbage had not been collected in days, and the stench wafting in through the car window was eye-watering. A few residents and street vendors were out, tending to their businesses with an air of resignation or shell-shocked obliviousness. Even in hell, you have to eat. A long line had formed outside one building next to a cemetery. Barry said the people were waiting for bread. "Now it's not crowded, by the way." The line would grow longer later in the day.

We stopped somewhere along the way so that our convoy could consult with other rebels. Barry and Mahmoud got out of the sedan to find out where we were headed. "Where we are going," he said on returning, "I am happy." Given what he had been up to less than 24 hours before, I replied that what made him happy made me very unhappy. He laughed and reassured me that this would be a scenic tour that required very little running. Our destination, as we discovered, was Bab al-Hadid ("the Iron Gate"), a 500-year-old structure that marks the entrance to Aleppo's ancient city. The rebels had secured this area just days before; the freshly erected FSA checkpoints were manned by two or three fighters. Wooden milk crates were the only barriers that had to be removed to allow us to proceed to our destination, a parking lot across

from a block of mostly shuttered storefronts and abandoned apartments. The armed fighters there, we were told, hailed from several different battalions. A middle-aged commander doled out instructions to each soldier. Some would be sent to guard checkpoints, others would deploy along a 650-foot perimeter around our location, in territories still very much controlled by the regime. "If you walk five minutes that way," Mahmoud said, pointing down a wide street that ran parallel to the Iron Gate, "you will be in downtown Aleppo. You'll also be in snipers' alley." Two guardsmen sat watch in front of a doormat with an image of Assad woven into it. Barry stepped on the dictator's face.

If any fighting was taking place this early in the morning, it was far enough away from us that we could not hear the shots. We spotted a helicopter flying a mile above us, although it did not appear to be getting ready to fire.

Civilians and yellow taxicabs wove in and out of this FSA safe zone all the time, evincing a life-must-go-on attitude in defiance of both sides. Unlike other sympathetic hotspots in Syria, Aleppo was still the latecomer to the revolution -- a city of Barry's "old men." At our hotel back in Turkey, Mahmoud had run into a wealthy Aleppine businessman who denied that the regime was bombing the city. "What does he think, that the rebels have jets and helicopters?" Mahmoud recounted to me indignantly. Aleppo is Syria's economic and industrial heart, and many revolutionaries suspect that its inhabitants care more for their wallets than their political freedoms.

No doubt there were some residents of the city who were downright hostile to any FSA presence, but on the whole most seemed indifferent. The imam of a local mosque, which rebels had turned into a sleeping quarters, was quite friendly, however. He brightened when I told him I was an American, and perhaps because we looked like we had not slept in days -- Mahmoud certainly had not -- he invited us to rest in his

mosque. Lying down on an embroidered carpet, I looked up at the chandeliers screwed into the arched ceiling and noticed that they held energy-saving bulbs. I fell asleep with the grimly amusing thought that small touches like these must have contributed to the Western delusion that Assad, a London-educated ophthalmologist with a runway-model wife, was a reformer. As we dozed, the distant thud of shelling could finally be heard.

When we awoke a few hours later, we set out in search of caffeine before making the trip back to al-Bab. In a dingy alleyway, a group of four rebels invited us to squat on the curb with them and drink chai. The leader of this platoon, Abu Muhammad, was a civilian who used to build military housing. He carried a pistol in his belt. Many Aleppines, he told me, still support Assad. Even in the liberated area around the Iron Gate, shabiha occasionally shoot at rebels from rooftops. I asked about the presence of foreign fighters in Aleppo, since news reports have suggested that radical Islamists from abroad had joined in the battle for the city. He said that the only foreign fighters he knew of were Iranian snipers operating near the citadel and Russians who were embedded with Assad's regular army. I took his statement with a grain of salt: Iran has admitted to a Revolutionary Guard Corps presence in Syria, but no credible evidence suggests that Russia has dispatched any forces, at least not yet. Still, in a country where paranoia and conspiracy theories masquerade as state-sponsored news, it is hard to fault any Syrian for rumormongering.

A small crowd had gathered around us by now. One rebel, perhaps thinking I had not fully grasped the enormity of his struggle, handed me a semi-exploded mortar.

NUMBERED DAYS

Within 48 hours of my leaving Syria and returning to London,

the regime had once again taken to shelling Bab al-Hadid, as Western newspapers reported that the rebels controlled between 50 to 60 percent of Aleppo. Assad's anticipated ground offensive had not yet materialized, but now the regime's most advanced warcraft, MiG fighter jets, were indiscriminately targeting FSA strongholds and civilian homes alike. Richard Spencer, a correspondent for the British Daily Telegraph, stood in front of one house where members of the Kayali and Katab families were wiped out by two missiles. A ten-year-old girl's head, Spencer reported, "was attached to a torso that ended at her stomach." Meanwhile, the newly appointed Sunni Prime Minister Riad Hijab and his family had just defected to Jordan after a dangerous holdover in an FSA safe house in the southern city of Daraa. He had reportedly been coordinating the move with the opposition for almost as long as he held office.

All these defections and rebel victories underscore the assertion, a favorite in unassertive Washington, that Assad's days are numbered. But what number? And under what conditions will his tyranny come to an end? No one I met in Syria had the answer. Unless the West plans to hasten that eventuality directly, it should not claim to, either.

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The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad

Mistaking Syria for Chechnya

Fiona Hill

COURTESY REUTERS

A Russian soldier in Chechnya, November 1999.

Few issues better illustrate the limits of the Obama administration's "reset" with Russia than the crisis in Syria. For more than a year, the United States has tried, and failed, to work with Russia to find a solution to end the violence. Moscow has firmly opposed international intervention to remove Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power, arguing that the conflict must be resolved through negotiations and that Assad must be included in any transitional arrangement leading to a new government. Although the Russian foreign

minister, Sergey Lavrov, reached out recently to the leaders of the Syrian opposition, these talks produced no indication that the Kremlin is seriously recalibrating its positions on Syria. And that's hardly surprising: the main obstacle to any shift in Russia's calculations is President Vladimir Putin himself, whose aversion to forcible regime change is intense and unwavering.

Why has Putin offered such steadfast support to Assad? On the surface, Moscow seems to profit from exporting arms to Syria, and it depends on the regime's good will to maintain Russian access to a naval facility at the Mediterranean port of Tartus. But these are marginal and symbolic interests. Putin is really motivated to support the Assad regime by his fear of state collapse -- a fear he confronted most directly during the secession of Russia's North Caucasus republic of Chechnya, which he brutally suppressed in a bloody civil war and counterinsurgency operation fought between 1999 and 2009. (In Russia, the republics are semi-autonomous federal units comprising the historic territories of the country's non-ethnic Russian groups.) In a series of interviews he gave in 2000 for an authorized biography, Putin declared that "the essence of the ... situation in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya ... is the continuation of the collapse of the USSR.... If we did not quickly do something to stop it, Russia as a state in its current form would cease to exist.... I was convinced that if we did not immediately stop the extremists [in Chechnya], then in no time at all we would be facing a second Yugoslavia across the entire territory of the Russian Federation -- the Yugoslavization of Russia." And we know how Putin feels about the demise of the Soviet Union; in 2005 he called it "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century," a comment that was meant to bemoan the collapse of the Soviet state rather than the demise of communism.

For Putin, Syria is all too reminiscent of Chechnya. Both conflicts pitted the state against disparate and leaderless

opposition forces, which over time came to include extremist Sunni Islamist groups. In Putin's view -- one that he stresses repeatedly in meetings with his U.S. and European counterparts -- Syria is the latest battleground in a global, multi-decade struggle between secular states and Sunni Islamism, which first began in Afghanistan with the Taliban, then moved to Chechnya, and has torn a number of Arab countries apart. Ever since he took office (first as prime minister in 1999 and then as president in 2000) and was confronted by the Chechen war, Putin has expressed his fear of Sunni Islamist extremism and of the risks that "jihadist" groups pose to Russia, with its large, indigenous, Sunni Muslim population, concentrated in the North Caucasus, the Volga region, and in major cities such as Moscow. A desire to contain extremism is a major reason why Putin offered help to the United States in battling the Taliban in Afghanistan after 9/11. It is also why Russia maintains close relations with Shia Iran, which acts as a counterweight to Sunni powers.

In the case of Chechnya, Putin made it clear that retaking the republic from its "extremist opposition forces" was worth every sacrifice. In a speech in September 1999, he promised to pursue Chechen rebels and terrorists even into "the outhouse." He did just that, and some opposition leaders were killed by missile attacks at their most vulnerable moments. The Chechen capital city of Grozny was reduced to rubble. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed, along with jihadist fighters who came into Chechnya with the encouragement of extremist groups from the Arab world, including from Syria. Moscow and other Russian cities endured devastating terrorist attacks. Putin's treatment of Chechnya became a cautionary tale of what would happen to rebels and terrorists -- and indeed to entire groups of people -- if they threatened the Russian state. They would either be eliminated or brought to their knees -- exactly the fate Putin wishes for today's Syrian rebels.

After two decades of secessionist strife, Putin has contained Chechnya's uprising. Ramzan Kadyrov, a former rebel who switched his allegiance to Moscow, now leads the republic. Putin granted Kadyrov and his supporters amnesty and gave them a mandate to go after other militants and political opponents. Kadyrov has rebuilt Grozny (with ample funds from Moscow) and created his own version of an Islamist and Chechen republic that is condemned by human rights organizations for its brutal suppression of dissent.

For the past two years, Putin has hoped that Assad would be able to do what he did in Chechnya and beat back the opposition. Based on the brutal record of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, in suppressing uprisings, Putin anticipated that the regime would have no problem keeping the state together. But now Assad seems to have failed, and Putin is not one to back a losing horse. He and the rest of the Russian leadership are well aware that their staunch support for Assad has damaged Russia's standing in the Arab world, but they have no alternative plan to get out of the stalemate. Putin is still not ready to sanction an intervention that could lead to the dismantling of the Syrian state and to risk creating a situation akin to that in Afghanistan in the 1990s, when warring groups of extremists fought each other and created a breeding ground for global jihadism. In Putin's view, lawless post-Qaddafi Libya, which has become an exporter of guns, fighters, and refugees to its neighbors, only further underscores the dangers of international intervention.

Before abandoning Assad, Putin will need to have answers to some pressing questions: Who will be responsible for the fallout from the regime's collapse? Who will keep Sunni extremists in check? Who will keep extremists away from the North Caucasus and other Russian regions with large Sunni Muslim populations? And finally, who will ensure the security of Syria's chemical weapons? Putin certainly does not trust the United States to play this stabilizing role: as he sees it,

when the United States pulled out of Iraq, it left behind a Shia strongman, Nouri al-Maliki, to suppress the Sunnis; the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is leaving only uncertainty in its wake. In short, Putin doubts that the United States and the international community can deliver stability to Syria, so he continues to stand by the flailing regime as the only means of avoiding the collapse of the state altogether.

Although Putin looks at Syria and sees Chechnya, the situations are quite different. All of Syria is in the throes of civil war, and Assad does not have the same resources that Putin had in dealing with Chechnya. He cannot eliminate key representatives and supporters of the opposition abroad as Putin did with the Chechens, including by assassinating the former acting Chechen President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev in Qatar in 2004 to stop his fundraising and recruiting activities. Unable to crush or co-opt the opposition, Assad has taken Syria over the precipice. Syria is also bristling with conventional weaponry along with an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction that pose a significant threat to neighboring states. Those neighbors -- Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Israel, and Iran farther afield -- have been engulfed in the conflict. In contrast, in spite of the flows of money and men into Chechnya and the spillover of refugees and terrorist acts into the rest of Russia (and sometimes into Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey), there was no similar proliferation threat in the Chechen war, and no outside powers ever became heavily involved. Chechnya is in a bad neighborhood, but Syria is in a terrible neighborhood, and the effects of the Syrian conflict cannot be contained in the way that Chechnya’s were.

Neither these differences nor the scale of the humanitarian tragedy will convince Putin to change his mind on Syria. The Russian president will continue to hold out against intervention and insist that negotiations with Assad must be part of the way forward, until some strongman can be found

to restore a semblance of order to Syria's chaos. If, by some miracle, Syria does not turn into a full-scale regional disaster, Putin will pat himself on the back and say it was thanks to him because he prevented an intervention. If the more likely scenario plays out, Putin will blame Washington. He will hold the United States responsible for destroying Syria and empowering Sunni Islamist extremists by championing democracy and the Arab revolutions. Meanwhile, Putin's obstinacy is already turning his worst nightmare -- the fracturing of a geopolitically important state -- into a reality.

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Syria's President Speaks

A Conversation With Bashar al-Assad

The president in Damascus, January 2015.

The civil war in Syria will soon enter its fifth year, with no end in sight. On January 20, Foreign Affairs managing editor Jonathan Tepperman met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus to discuss the conflict in an exclusive interview.

I would like to start by asking you about the war. It has now been going on for almost four years, and you know the statistics: more than 200,000 people have been killed, a million wounded, and more than three million Syrians have fled the country, according to the UN. Your forces have also suffered heavy casualties. The war cannot go on forever. How do you see the war ending? All wars anywhere in the world

have ended with a political solution, because war itself is not the solution; war is one of the instruments of politics. So you end with a political solution. That's how we see it. That is the headline.

You don't think that this war will end militarily? No. Any war ends with a political solution.

Your country is increasingly divided into three ministates: one controlled by the government, one controlled by ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and one controlled by the more secular Sunni and Kurdish opposition. How will you ever put Syria back together again? First of all, this image is not accurate, because you cannot talk about ministates without talking about the people who live within those states. The Syrian people are still with the unity of Syria; they still support the government. The factions you refer to control some areas, but they move from one place to another—they are not stable, and there are no clear lines of separation between different forces. Sometimes they mingle with each other and they move. But the main issue is about the population. The population still supports the state regardless of whether they support it politically or not; I mean they support the state as the representative of the unity of Syria. So as long as you have the Syrian people believing in unity, any government and any official can unify Syria. If the people are divided into two, three, or four groups, no one can unify this country. That's how we see it.

You really think that the Sunnis and the Kurds still believe in a unified Syria? If you go to Damascus now, you can see all the different, let's say, colors of our society living together. So the divisions in Syria are not based on sectarian or ethnic grounds. And even in the Kurdish area you are talking about, we have two different colors: we have Arabs more than Kurds. So it's not about the ethnicity; it's about the factions that control certain areas militarily.

A year ago, both the opposition and foreign governments were insisting that you step down as a precondition to talks. They no longer are. Diplomats are now looking for an interim settlement that would allow you to keep a role. Just today, The New York Times had an article that talked about increased U.S. support for the Russian and UN peace initiatives. The article refers to “the West’s quiet retreat from its demands that Syria’s president step down immediately.” Given this shift in the Western attitude, are you now more open to a negotiated solution to the conflict that leads to a political transition? From the very beginning, we were open. We engaged in dialogue with every party in Syria. Party doesn’t mean political party; it could be a party, a current, or some personality; it could be any political entity. We changed the constitution, and we are open to anything. But when you want to do something, it’s not about the opposition or about the government; it’s about the Syrians. Sometimes you might have a majority that doesn’t belong to any side. So when you want to make a change, as long as you’re talking about a national problem, every Syrian must have a say in it. When you have a dialogue, it’s not between the government and the opposition; it’s between the different Syrian parties and entities. That’s how we look at dialogue. This is first. Second, whatever solution you want to make, at the end you should go back to the people through a referendum, because you’re talking about the constitution, changing the political system, whatever. You have to go back to the Syrian people. So engaging in a dialogue is different from taking decisions, which is not done by the government or the opposition.

So you’re saying that you would not agree to any kind of political transition unless there is a referendum that supports it? Exactly. The people should make the decision, not anyone else.

Does that mean there’s no room for negotiations? No, we will go to Russia, we will go to these negotiations, but there is

another question here: Who do you negotiate with? As a government, we have institutions, we have an army, and we have influence, positive or negative, in any direction, at any time. Whereas the people we are going to negotiate with, who do they represent? That's the question. When you talk about the opposition, it has to have meaning. The opposition in general has to have representatives in the local administration, in the parliament, in institutions; they have to have grass roots to represent on their behalf. In the current crisis, you have to ask about the opposition's influence on the ground. You have to go back to what the rebels announced publicly, when they said many times that the opposition doesn't represent us—they have no influence. If you want to talk about fruitful dialogue, it's going to be between the government and those rebels. There is another point. Opposition means national; it means working for the interests of the Syrian people. It cannot be an opposition if it's a puppet of Qatar or Saudi Arabia or any Western country, including the United States, paid from the outside. It should be Syrian. We have a national opposition. I'm not excluding it; I'm not saying every opposition is not legitimate. But you have to separate the national and the puppets. Not every dialogue is fruitful.

Does that mean you would not want to meet with opposition forces that are backed by outside countries? We are going to meet with everyone. We don't have conditions.

No conditions? No conditions.

You would meet with everyone? Yes, we're going to meet with everyone. But you have to ask each one of them: Who do you represent? That's what I mean.

If I'm correct, the deputy of the UN representative Staffan de Mistura is in Syria now. They're proposing as an interim measure a cease-fire and a freeze in Aleppo. Would you agree

to that? Yes, of course. We implemented that before de Mistura was assigned to his mission. We implemented it in another city called Homs, another big city. We implemented it on smaller scales in different, let's say, suburbs, villages, and so on, and it succeeded. So the idea is very good, but it depends on the details. De Mistura came to Syria with headlines. We agreed upon certain headlines, and now we are waiting for him to bring a detailed plan or schedule—A-to-Z plan, let's say. We are discussing this with his deputy.

In the past, you insisted as a precondition for a cease-fire that the rebels lay down their weapons first, which obviously from their perspective was a nonstarter. Is that still your precondition? We choose different scenarios or different reconciliations. In some areas, we allowed them to leave inhabited areas in order to prevent casualties among civilians. They left these areas with their armaments. In other areas, they gave up their armaments and they left. It depends on what they offer and what you offer.

I'm not clear on your answer. Would you insist that they lay down their weapons? No, no. That's not what I mean. In some areas, they left the area with their armaments—that is what I mean.

Are you optimistic about the Moscow talks? What is going on in Moscow is not negotiations about the solution; it's only preparations for the conference.

So talks about talks? Exactly—how to prepare for the talks. So when you start talking about the conference, what are the principles of the conference? I'll go back to the same point. Let me be frank: some of the groups are puppets, as I said, of other countries. They have to implement that agenda, and I know that many countries, like France, for example, do not have any interest in making that conference succeed. So they will give them orders to make them fail. You have other

personalities who only represent themselves; they don't represent anyone in Syria. Some of them never lived in Syria, and they know nothing about the country. Of course, you have some other personalities who work for the national interest. So when you talk about the opposition as one entity, who's going to have influence on the other? That is the question. It's not clear yet. So optimism would be an exaggeration. I wouldn't say I'm pessimistic. I would say we have hope, in every action.

It seems that in recent days, the Americans have become more supportive of the Moscow talks. Initially, they were not. Yesterday, Secretary of State Kerry said something to suggest that the United States hopes that the talks go forward and that they are successful. They always say things, but it's about what they're going to do. And you know there's mistrust between the Syrians and the U.S. So just wait till we see what will happen at the conference.

So what do you see as the best way to strike a deal between all the different parties in Syria? It's to deal directly with the rebels, but you have two different kinds of rebels. Now, the majority are al Qaeda, which is ISIS and al-Nusra, with other similar factions that belong to al Qaeda but are smaller. Now, what's left, what Obama called the "fantasy," what he called the "moderate opposition"—it's not an opposition; they are rebels. Most of them joined al Qaeda, and some of them rejoined the army recently. During the last week, a lot of them left those groups and came to the army.

Are these former defectors who came back? Yes, they came back to the army. They said, "We don't want to fight anymore." So what's left of those is very little. At the end, can you negotiate with al Qaeda, and others? They are not ready to negotiate; they have their own plan. The reconciliation that we started and Mr. de Mistura is going to continue is the practical solution on the ground. This is the first point.

Second, you have to implement the Security Council resolution, no. 2170, on al-Nusra and ISIS, which was issued a few months ago, and this resolution is very clear about preventing anyone from supporting these factions militarily, financially, or logistically. Yet this is what Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are still doing. If it’s not implemented, we cannot talk about a real solution, because there will be obstacles as long as they spend money. So this is how we can start. Third, the Western countries should remove the umbrella still referred to by some as “supporting the moderate opposition.” They know we have mainly al Qaeda, ISIS, and al-Nusra.

Would you be prepared to take any confidence-building measures in advance of the talks? For example, prisoner exchanges, or ending the use of barrel bombs, or releasing political prisoners, in order to build confidence on the other side that you’re willing to negotiate in good faith? It’s not a personal relationship; it’s about mechanisms. In politics, you only talk about mechanisms. You don’t have to trust someone to do something. If you have a clear mechanism, you can reach a result. That is what the people want. So the question is, what is the mechanism that we can put in place? This takes us back to the same question: Who are they? What do they represent? What’s their influence? What is the point of building trust with people with no influence?

When two parties come together, it’s often very useful for one party to show the other that it’s really interested in making progress by taking steps unilaterally to try and bring down the temperature. The measures that I described would have that effect. You have something concrete, and that is reconciliation. People gave up their armaments; we gave them amnesty; they live normal lives. It is a real example. So this is a measure of confidence. On the other hand, what is the relation between that opposition and the prisoners? There’s no relation. They are not their prisoners anyway. So it

is completely a different issue.

So have you offered amnesty to fighters? Yes, of course, and we did it many times.

How many—do you have numbers? I don’t have the precise numbers, but it’s thousands, not hundreds, thousands of militants.

And are you prepared to say to the entire opposition that if you lay down your weapons, you will be safe? Yes, I said it publicly in one of my speeches.

And how can you guarantee their safety? Because they have reasons to distrust your government. You cannot. But at the end, let’s say that if more than 50 percent succeed, more than 50 percent in such circumstances would be a success. So that’s how. Nothing is absolute. You have to expect some negative aspects, but they are not the major aspects.

Let me change the subject slightly. Hezbollah, Iran’s Quds Force, and Iranian-trained Shiite militias are all now playing significant roles in the fight against rebels here in Syria. Given this involvement, are you worried about Iran’s influence over the country? After all, Iraq or even Lebanon shows that once a foreign military power becomes established in a country, it can be very difficult to get them to leave again. Iran is an important country in this region, and it was influential before the crisis. Its influence is not related to the crisis; it’s related to its role, its political position in general. When you talk about influence, various factors make a certain country influential. In the Middle East, in our region, you have the same society, the same ideology, many similar things, the same tribes, going across borders. So if you have influence on one factor, your influence will be crossing the border. This is part of our nature. It’s not related to the conflict. Of course, when there is conflict and anarchy,

another country will be more influential in your country. When you don’t have the will to have a sovereign country, you will have that influence. Now, the answer to your question is, Iran doesn’t have any ambitions in Syria, and as a country, as Syria, we would never allow any country to influence our sovereignty. We wouldn’t accept it, and the Iranians don’t want it either. We allow cooperation. But if you allowed any country to have influence, why not allow the Americans to have influence in Syria? That’s the problem with the Americans and with the West: they want to have influence without cooperation.

Let me just push you a little bit further. Last week, a commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, of their airspace command, Hajizadeh, said in an interview in Der Spiegel that Iran’s supreme leader has ordered his forces to build and operate missile plants in Syria. That suggests that Iran is playing a greater role and doing it on its own. No, no. Playing a role through cooperation is different from playing a role through hegemony.

So everything that Iran is doing ... ? Of course, in full cooperation with the Syrian government, and that’s always the case.

Now Iran is one thing to deal with because it’s a country. But you also have militias, which are substate actors and therefore more complicated. One problem with working with these groups is that, unlike a government, they may not be willing to cooperate and it’s not always clear who to talk to. Are you worried about your ability to control these forces and to rein them in if you need to? And, a related question, this week, Israel attacked Hezbollah forces in the Golan Heights, and the Israelis suggest that they attacked them because Hezbollah was planning an attack on Israel from Syrian territory. Doesn’t this also highlight the danger of allowing militias with their own agendas, not necessarily your agenda,

to come into the war? Do you mean Syrian, or any other militias in general?

I mean especially Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shiite militias. It's natural to say that only the institutions of the government, of the state, let's say, are the guarantee for stability and to put things in order. Any other factor that would play a role in parallel with the government could be positive, could be good in certain circumstances, but it will always have side effects, negative side effects. That is a natural thing. And having militias who support the government is a side effect of the war. You have it, but you're going to try to control this side effect. Nobody will feel more comfortable than if they are dealing with government institutions, including the army and the police and so on. But talking about what happened in Quneitra is something completely different. Never has an operation against Israel happened through the Golan Heights since the cease-fire in 1974. It has never happened. So for Israel to allege that there was a plan for an operation—that's a far cry from reality, just an excuse, because they wanted to assassinate somebody from Hezbollah.

But the Israelis have been very careful since the war began to not get involved except when they felt their interests were directly threatened. That's not true, because they've been attacking Syria now for nearly two years, without any reason.

But in each case, they say it's because Hezbollah was being given weapons from Iran through Syria. They attacked army positions. What is the relation between Hezbollah and the army?

Those were cases where the army accidentally shelled ... Those are false allegations.

So what do you think Israel's agenda is? They are supporting the rebels in Syria. It's very clear. Because whenever we

make advances in some place, they make an attack in order to undermine the army. It's very clear. That's why some in Syria joke: "How can you say that al Qaeda doesn't have an air force? They have the Israeli air force."

To return to my question about militias, do you feel confident that you'll be able to control them when this war ends? Because after all, to have effective sovereignty, any government has to have what's called a monopoly of force, and that's very hard when you have these independent armed groups running around. That's self-evident: the state cannot fulfill its commitment to society if it's not the only master of order.

But you see in Iraq how hard that is. It is now very difficult for the government to control all the Shiite militias that were empowered during the war. There's a very important reason in Iraq: it's because Paul Bremer didn't create a constitution for the state; he created one for factions. Whereas in Syria, why did the army stand fast for four years in spite of this embargo, this war, tens of countries around the world attacking Syria and supporting the rebels? Because it has a real constitution, a real, secular constitution. That is the reason. In Iraq, it is sectarian. When you talk about a sectarian constitution, it's not a constitution.

But what will you do about these militias when the war ends? Things should go back to normal, like before the war.

And you're confident … ? Yes. We don't have any other option. That is the role of the government. This is self-evident.

What impact are falling oil prices having on the war in Syria? After all, your two closest allies and supporters, Iran and Russia, are very dependent on oil prices, and they have suffered tremendous damage to their budgets in recent months as the price of oil has fallen. Do you worry about their

ability to continue helping you? No, because they don’t give us money, so it has no effect on Syria. Even if they are going to help us, it would be in the form of loans. We’re like any other country: we have loans. Sometimes we pay; sometimes we take loans.

But their military support costs them money, and if they have less money to pay for their own militaries, won’t that become a problem? No, because when you pay for armaments or any other goods, you don’t have a problem.

So you’re saying everything you’re getting from the Russians and the Iranians ... ? So far, we haven’t seen any changes, so what the influence is on them, I cannot answer.

You’ve said in past interviews that you and your government have made mistakes in the course of the war. What are those mistakes? Is there anything that you regret? Every government, every person, makes mistakes, so that’s again self-evident; it’s a given. But if you want to talk about political mistakes, you have to ask yourself, what are the major decisions that you took since the crisis started? We took three main decisions: First of all, to be open to all dialogue. Second, we changed the constitution and the law according to what many in the opposition were saying, allegedly, that this is the reason of the crisis. Third, we took the decision to defend our country, to defend ourself, to fight terrorists. So I don’t think those three decisions can be described as wrong or mistakes. If you want to talk about practice, any official in any place can make mistakes, but there’s a difference between practice mistakes and policy mistakes.

Can you describe some of the practical mistakes? I would have to go back to officials on the ground; there’s nothing in my mind. I would rather talk about policies.

Do you feel there have been any policy mistakes that you’re

responsible for? I mentioned the major decisions.

But you said those are not mistakes. To defend the country from terrorism? If I wanted to say that it’s a mistake, then to be correct would be to support the terrorists.

I’m just wondering if there’s anything you did that you wish in retrospect you had done differently. Regarding these three main decisions, they were correct, and I am confident about this.

In terms of lower-level practical mistakes, are people being held accountable, say, for human rights abuses, for the excessive use of force, or the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, those kinds of things? Yes. Some people were detained because they breached the law in that regard, and that happens of course in such circumstances.

In terms of their treatment of civilians or protesters, is that what you’re referring to? Yes, during the protests at the very beginning, yes.

Since the United States began its air campaign against the Islamic State, Syria and the United States have become strange kinds of partners and are effectively cooperating in that aspect of the fight. Do you see the potential for increased cooperation with the United States? Yes, the potential is definitely always there, because we’ve been talking about or asking for international cooperation against terrorism for 30 years. But this potential needs will. The question that we have is, how much will does the United States have to really fight terrorism on the ground? So far, we haven’t seen anything concrete in spite of the attacks on ISIS in northern Syria. There’s nothing concrete. What we’ve seen so far is just, let’s say, window-dressing, nothing real. Since the beginning of these attacks, ISIS has gained more land in Syria and Iraq.

What about the air strikes on Kobani? Those have been

effective in slowing down ISIS. Kobani is a small city, with about 50,000 inhabitants. It's been more than three months since the beginning of the attacks, and they haven't finished. Same areas, same al Qaeda factions occupying them—the Syrian army liberated in less than three weeks. It means they're not serious about fighting terrorism.

So are you saying you want greater U.S. involvement in the war against ISIS? It's not about greater involvement by the military, because it's not only about the military; it's about politics. It's about how much the United States wants to influence the Turks. Because if the terrorists can withstand the air strikes for this period, it means that the Turks keep sending them armaments and money. Did the United States put any pressure on Turkey to stop the support of al Qaeda? They didn't; they haven't. So it's not only about military involvement. This is first. Second, if you want to talk about the military involvement, American officials publicly acknowledge that without troops on the ground, they cannot achieve anything concrete. Which troops on the grounds are you depending on?

So are you suggesting there should be U.S. troops on the ground? Not U.S. troops. I'm talking about the principle, the military principle. I'm not saying American troops. If you want to say I want to make war on terrorism, you have to have troops on the ground. The question you have to ask the Americans is, which troops are you going to depend on? Definitely, it has to be Syrian troops. This is our land; this is our country. We are responsible. We don't ask for American troops at all.

So what would you like to see from the United States? You mentioned more pressure on Turkey ... Pressure on Turkey, pressure on Saudi Arabia, pressure on Qatar to stop supporting the rebels. Second, to make legal cooperation with Syria and start by asking permission from our government to

make such attacks. They didn’t, so it’s illegal.

I’m sorry, I’m not clear on that point. You want them to make legal … ? Of course, if you want to make any kind of action in another country, you ask their permission.

I see. So a formal agreement between Washington and Damascus to allow for air strikes? The format we can discuss later, but you start with permission. Is it an agreement? Is it a treaty? That’s another issue.

And would you be willing to take steps to make cooperation easier with Washington? With any country that is serious about fighting terrorism, we are ready to make cooperation, if they’re serious.

What steps would you be prepared to make to show Washington that you’re willing to cooperate? I think they are the ones who have to show the will. We are already fighting on the ground; we don’t have to show that.

The United States is currently training 5,000 Syrian fighters who are scheduled to enter Syria in May. Now, U.S. General John Allen has been very careful to say that these troops will not be directed at the Syrian government, but will be focused on ISIS alone. What will you do when these troops enter the country? Will you allow them to enter? Will you attack them? Any troops that don’t work in cooperation with the Syrian army are illegal and should be fought. That’s very clear.

Even if this brings you into conflict with the United States? Without cooperation with Syrian troops, they are illegal, and are puppets of another country, so they are going to be fought like any other illegal militia fighting against the Syrian army. But that brings another question, about those troops. Obama said that they are a fantasy. How did fantasy become reality?

I think with this kind of training program. But you can’t make

extremism moderate.

There are still some moderate members of the opposition. They are weaker and weaker all the time, but I think the U.S. government is trying very carefully to ensure that the fighters it trains are not radicals. But the question is, why is the moderate opposition—if you call them opposition; we call them rebels—why are they weaker and weaker? They are still weaker because of developments in the Syrian crisis. Bringing 5,000 from the outside will make most of them defect and join ISIS and other groups, which is what happened during the last year. So that's why I said it's still illusory. It is not the 5,000 that are illusory but the idea itself that is illusory.

Part of what makes Washington so reluctant to cooperate with you more formally are the allegations of serious human rights abuses by your government. These allegations aren't just from the U.S. government; they are also from the UN Human Rights Commission, the independent Special Investigative Commission of the UN. You are familiar with these allegations, I'm sure. They include denying access for relief groups to refugee camps, indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets, photo evidence provided by the defector code-named Caesar, who made a presentation to the U.S. Congress showing terrible torture and abuse in Syrian prisons. Are you prepared to take action on these issues in order to make cooperation with the United States easier? The funny thing about this administration is that it's the first one in history to build its evaluation and later decisions on social media. We call it a social media administration, which is not politics. None of these allegations you mentioned are concrete; all of them are allegations. You can bring photos from anyone and say this is torture. Who took the pictures? Who is he? Nobody knows. There is no verification of any of this evidence, so it's all allegations without evidence.

But Caesar's photos have been looked at by independent

European investigators. No, no. It’s funded by Qatar, and they say it’s an anonymous source. So nothing is clear or proven. The pictures are not clear which person they show. They’re just pictures of a head, for example, with some skulls. Who said this is done by the government, not by the rebels? Who said this is a Syrian victim, not someone else? For example, photos published at the beginning of the crisis were from Iraq and Yemen. Second, the United States in particular and the West in general are in no position to talk about human rights. They are responsible for most of the killings in the region, especially the United States after getting into Iraq, and the United Kingdom after invading Libya, and the situation in Yemen, and what happened in Egypt in supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and terrorism in Tunisia. All these problems happened because of the United States. They were the first ones to trample international law and Security Council resolutions, not us.

That may or may not be true, but those are separate issues, and that does not absolve your government of responsibility. No, no. The United States accused, so we have to answer that part. I’m not saying if there’s any human rights breach or infringement, the government has no responsibility. That is another issue. The second part of your question is about the allegations. They’re still allegations. If you want me to answer, I have to answer about something that is concrete, proved, and verified.

Are you prepared to categorically deny that there’s torture and abuse of prisoners in Syria? If there’s any unbiased and fair way to verify all those allegations, of course we are ready. That would be in our interest.

What impact would a U.S.-Iranian nuclear deal have on Syria? Nothing, because the crisis here was never part of the negotiations, and Iran refused to make it such. And that is correct, because there is no link between the two.

But many in the United States anticipate that if Iran and the United States strike a deal, it will make cooperation between the two countries much easier. People therefore wonder if Iran might decide to reduce its support for Syria as a favor to the U.S. government. We have never had any positive information about such a thing, never. I cannot discuss something which I don't have any information about.

Describe whether you think the war is going well from the government's perspective. Independent analysts have suggested that your government currently controls 45 to 50 percent of the territory of Syria. First of all, if you want to describe the arena—it's not a war between two countries, between two armies where you have an incursion and you lost some territory that you want to regain. It's not like this. We're talking about rebels that infiltrate areas inhabited by civilians. You have Syrian terrorists that support foreign terrorists to come and hide among civilians. They launch what you call guerrilla attacks. That is the shape of this war, so you cannot look at it as being about territory. Second, wherever the Syrian army has wanted to go, it has succeeded. But the Syrian army cannot have a presence on every kilometer of Syrian territory. That's impossible. We made some advances in the past two years. But if you want to ask me, "Is it going well?" I say that every war is bad, because you always lose, you always have destruction in a war. The main question is, what have we won in this war? What we won in this war is that the Syrian people have rejected the terrorists; the Syrian people support their government more; the Syrian people support their army more. Before talking about winning territory, talk about winning the hearts and minds and the support of the Syrian people. That's what we have won. What's left is logistical; it's technical. That is a matter of time. The war is moving in a positive way. But that doesn't mean you're not losing on the national level. Because you lose lives, you lose infrastructure; the war itself has very bad social

effects.

Do you think you will eventually defeat the rebels militarily? If they don’t have external support, and no, let’s say, supply and recruitment of new terrorists within Syria, there will be no problem defeating them. Even today we don’t have a problem militarily. The problem is that they still have this continuous supply, mainly from Turkey.

So Turkey seems to be the neighbor that you’re most concerned about? Exactly. Logistically, and about terrorist financing from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, but through Turkey.

Do you blame Erdogan personally? This is a man you once had a fairly good relationship with. Yes. Because he belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood ideology, which is the base of al Qaeda; it was the first political Islamic organization that promoted violent political Islam in the early twentieth century. He belongs strongly and is a staunch believer in these values. He’s very fanatical, and that’s why he still supports ISIS. He is personally responsible for what happened.

Do you see any other potential partners in the region? For example, General el-Sisi in Egypt? I wouldn’t talk about him personally, but as long as Egypt and the Egyptian army and the government are fighting the same kind of terrorists as in Iraq, of course, we can consider these countries eligible to cooperate with in fighting the same enemy.

Two final questions, if I may. Can you imagine a scenario in which Syria returns to the status quo as it was before the fighting started almost four years ago? In what sense?

In the sense that Syria is whole again, it is not divided, it controls its borders, it starts to rebuild, and it is at peace and a predominantly secular country. If you look at a military map now, the Syrian army exists in every corner. Not every place; by every corner, I mean north, south, east, west, and

between. If you didn’t believe in a unified Syria, that Syria can go back to its previous position, you wouldn’t send the army there, as a government. If you don’t believe in this as a people, you would have seen people in Syria isolated into different ghettos based on ethnic and sectarian or religious identity. As long as this is not the situation, the people live with each other; the army is everywhere; the army is made up of every color of Syrian society, or the Syrian fabric. This means that we all believe Syria should go back to the way it was. We don’t have any other option, because if it doesn’t go back to its previous position, that will affect every surrounding country. It’s one fabric—it’s a domino effect that will have influence from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

If you were able to deliver a message to President Obama today, what would it be? I think the normal thing that you ask any official in the world is to work for the interests of his people. And the question I would ask any American is, what do you get from supporting terrorists in our country, in our region? What did you get from supporting the Muslim Brotherhood a few years ago in Egypt and other countries? What did you get from supporting someone like Erdogan? One of the officials from your country asked me seven years ago in Syria at the end of a meeting, “How do you think we can solve the problem in Afghanistan?” I told him, “You have to be able to deal with officials who are not puppets, who can tell you no.” So for the United States, only looking for puppet officials and client states is not how you can serve the interests of your country. You are the greatest power in the world now; you have too many things to disseminate around the world: knowledge, innovation, IT, with its positive repercussions. How can you be the best in these fields yet the worst in the political field? This is a contradiction. That is what I think the American people should analyze and question. Why do you fail in every war? You can create war, you can create problems, but you cannot solve any problem. Twenty years of the peace

process in Palestine and Israel, and you cannot do anything with this, in spite of the fact that you are a great country.

But in the context of Syria, what would a better policy look like? One that preserves stability in the Middle East. Syria is the heart of the Middle East. Everybody knows that. If the Middle East is sick, the whole world will be unstable. In 1991, when we started the peace process, we had a lot of hope. Now, after more than 20 years, things are not at square one; they're much below that square. So the policy should be to help peace in the region, to fight terrorism, to promote secularism, to support this area economically, to help upgrade the mind and society, like you did in your country. That is the supposed mission of the United States, not to launch wars. Launching war doesn't make you a great power.

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The New Great Game

How Regional Powers are Carving Up Syria

Andrew J. Tabler

OMAR SANADIKI / REUTERS

A picture of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad is displayed on a damaged structure at the entrance of al-Dukhaneya neighbourhood near Damascus, October 7, 2014.

Just two weeks ago, the first 54 graduates of Washington's trumpeted program to train and equip the Syrian opposition crossed from Turkey into Syria. They were immediately attacked by al Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra, which killed and captured a number of the trainees. The media and Congress rightfully focused on the inauspicious start to a program conceived well over a year ago, but lost in the shuffle was the fact that the unit's commander is a Syrian Turkmen—an

ethnic Turk with Syrian citizenship—and that the area through which the unit marched into Syria, the same territory that Turkey now proposes as a safe zone, is dominated by the very same sect.

BASSAM KHABIEH / REUTERS

Rebel fighters take part in a military display as part of a graduation ceremony at a camp in eastern al-Ghouta, near Damascus, July 12, 2015.

Turkey is hardly alone in efforts to carve out friendly zones in the mayhem of the Syrian war. For over two years, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is based southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq, has worked with its own local affiliate to establish Rojava, the Western province of Kurdistan. Jordan, whose intelligence services have been active in southern Syria for years, has been reaching out to local fighters and tribesmen in a bid to keep the Islamic State (also called ISIS) at bay. And some in Israel are considering working with Syria's Druze community, parts of which straddle the Golan frontier. On a regional level, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are also supporting groups in both northern and

southern Syria, and Iran is sending record numbers of Hezbollah and Shia militiamen and billions of dollars annually to assist the Bashar al-Assad regime in western Syria.

As most of the world has stood by and watched Syria's disintegration, regional powers have been busy claiming spheres of influence in the country in the name of security and humanitarian assistance. Bit by bit, Syria's neighbors are redrawing that county's map, the balance of power in the Middle East, and U.S. foreign policy.

TURKEY'S TAKE

Perhaps the most prominent country planning to carve out a sphere of influence in Syria is Turkey, which recently reached a tentative agreement with the United States to establish an "Islamic State Free Zone." The 60-mile-wide zone, extending from the northern Syrian border town of Azaz eastward to

Jarabulus on the Euphrates River, is designed to insulate Turkey from ISIS and seal the Syrian-Turkish border. The catalyst was a massive bomb blast in late July, claimed by ISIS, which killed 32 and injured 100 in the Turkish town of Suruc. In theory, Syrian insurgents, supported by Turkish artillery and possibly protected by Turkish and U.S. air cover will secure the zone. The agreement is a culmination of years of Turkish proposals to establish a no-fly zone in northern Syria that would serve as a staging area for rebels aiming to topple Assad.

Initial reports indicate that Turkish forces will not enter the zone. But the territory roughly overlaps with Syria's largest pocket of ethnic Turkmen, so Turkey could be planning to rely on them as a local base of support.

Initial reports indicate that Turkish forces will not enter the zone. But the territory roughly overlaps with Syria's largest pocket of ethnic Turkmen, so Turkey could be planning to rely on them as a local base of support. Turkmen, who number only 300,000 in Syria, are ethnically distinct from Syrian Sunni Arabs, who represent about 65 percent of the Syrian population and make up the lion's share of the armed opposition.

KURDISH CONNECTION

Also on Syria's northern border, the PKK is vying for influence. Two years ago, Syria's Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian offshoot of the PKK, and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) set up the Kurdish Supreme Committee, which declared the de facto autonomous region of Rojava. The new autonomous region consists of three cantons in Afrin, Kobani, and Hassakah. Although the Supreme Committee and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), insist that they are not the PKK, Turkey has sealed its border with Rojava over concerns that the units are but a fig

leaf for the PKK. Ankara, as well as other Kurdish factions, openly dislike the support PYD receives from Iran and its tolerance of Assad regime forces in Hassakah.

MURAD SEZER / REUTERS

A Kurdish Syrian refugee waits for transport during a sand storm on the Turkish-Syrian border near the southeastern town of Suruc in Sanliurfa province, September 24, 2014.

Last month, the United States launched airstrikes against ISIS to support the People's Protection Units (YPG) and conducted an operation to seize the border region of Tal Abyad from ISIS. This key battlefield victory united the long separated cantons of Kobani and Hassakah, giving the Kurdish sphere perhaps the most territorial integrity in Syria outside of Assad regime areas. Some in the PYD now advocate pushing west to Afrin to form a Kurdish belt across the northern border of Syria. In response, Turkey and the United States agreed to keep the PYD out of Turkey's proposed safe zone.

JORDAN'S ZONE

On Syria's southwestern border, Jordan is also preparing to carve out a sphere of influence. For years, Jordanian intelligence, which closely coordinates with the United States, has actively tracked and worked with rebels in southern Syria. As the conflict has worsened, Jordanian officials increasingly find themselves in a no-win situation. If the rebels take Damascus, further chaos just 60 miles from the Jordanian border is almost certain. If Assad wins and tries to retake the south, thousands more refugees would pour into Jordan. And, given the Assad regime's lack of manpower, Syria would still be extremely unstable. If the country's chaotic partition continues, the regime's continued use of chemical weapons and reliance on Iran would further push Syria's rebels into the hands of radical jihadists such as ISIS, a problem no country wants nearby.

MUHAMMAD HAMED / REUTERS

Syrian protesters living in Jordan burn shoes symbolizing Iran, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Russia, and China during a protest against the killing of at least 108 people in the Syrian town of Houla last Friday, outside the Syrian embassy in Amman, May 31, 2012.

A Financial Times report released on June 29 to coincide with the Turkish announcement of a potential safe area, indicates that Jordan is planning to set up its own humanitarian buffer zone inside Syria in response to the Assad regime's battlefield losses and due to the fear of an ISIS expansion in southern Syria. The exact details of the plan remain sketchy. On June 14, Jordanian King Abdullah pledged to "support" the tribes of southern Syria and western Iraq to protect Jordan from ISIS, which was widely interpreted to mean that he would arm them. But on July 30, the Jordanian government issued a press release saying that the King's comments "were misinterpreted."

Regardless, the announcement followed a debate in the Jordanian press on Hashemite interests in southern Syria, which date back to the Great Arab Revolt of 1916–18. Traditionally, Jordan's sphere of influence roughly overlaps with the Houran, the volcanic plateau south of Damascus that straddles the Syrian–Jordanian border. By relying on Houran-based fighters and tribesmen, with whom Jordanians share kinship, Jordan has successfully kept ISIS out of southern Syria (so far) and kept Nusra, whose southern leadership also hails from the Houran region, in check. Some Jordanians even insist that local Nusra leaders could be "peeled away" to more moderate battalions.

Traditionally, Jordan's sphere of influence roughly overlaps with the Houran, the volcanic plateau south of Damascus that straddles the Syrian–Jordanian border.

ISRAELI AREA

Jordan's sphere of influence in Syria partially overlaps with that of Israel, which is increasingly concerned about the political and military vacuum to the east of the Golan frontier. For years, Israel has quietly engaged rebel groups in southern Syria, provided extensive medical support to those fleeing the

fighting, and tolerated weakened Assad regime forces on the northern Golan. Israel and Jordan share common goals in southern Syria, most notably keeping ISIS and Iran out of the Houran and Quneitra. But Israel's policy options have been constrained by two hard realities: first, that the most effective rebel units in southern Syria are jihadists, who are fundamentally opposed to the State of Israel, and second, that the only way the Assad regime, which Israel had generally tolerated, can retake all of southern Syria is with direct help from Iran, which is Israel's primary strategic enemy.

NIR ELIAS / REUTERS

Israeli security forces stand in their position in the Druze village of Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights, as protesters are seen on the Syrian side of the Israeli-Syrian border, June 5, 2011.

Some Israelis see a potential middle path through the Druze, an ethnic minority that resides in both Syria and Israel and whose brethren are historically close to the Assad regime. Over the last year, several Israeli officials have quietly indicated that they owe the Druze a debt for their service in the Israeli armed forces. Outreach to the Druze is

complicated by the fact that some Druze are actively involved in Hezbollah-inspired IED attacks along the Golan fence. But a series of Assad regime withdrawals from Druze areas over the last few months have reportedly caused some Druze to look for options to defend themselves against jihadists.

IRAN'S GAME

Iran's motivations for what, by most estimates, is the largest foreign intervention in Syria, are to ensure a safe corridor for arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon, maintain a presence on the Golan Heights to attack Israel, and ensure that what is left of the Assad regime does Iran's bidding.

Iran's multilayered attempt to prop up the Assad regime has carved out what is arguably the largest sphere of influence in Syria. Based out of Lebanon, Iranian-backed Hezbollah are active in the border region of Qalamoun and in the Assad regime's northern and southern campaigns. Iraqi and Afghan Shia militias imported by Tehran are actively involved in the same campaigns. Perhaps the most prominent example of Iranian influence has come via Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Quds Force activities to develop Syria's paramilitary, which by some estimates, is now as large as the Syrian army. This comes in addition to an estimated $6 billion in annual economic and energy support from Tehran that has helped prop up what is left of the Assad regime.

Iran's motivations for what, by most estimates, is the largest foreign intervention in Syria, are to ensure a safe corridor for arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon, maintain a presence on the Golan Heights to attack Israel, and ensure that what is left of the Assad regime does Iran's bidding. Despite the Assad regime's recent battlefield defeats, even moderates in Iran say their support to the regime can outlast that of the rebels.

KHALIL ASHAWI / REUTERS

A rainbow is seen over an Islamic Ahrar al-Sham fighter on the frontline of Idlib city in northern Syria, where they announced a battle to liberate the city from forces loyal to Syria's president Bashar Al-Assad, March 20, 2015.

GULF GOALS

Although they lack a territorial foothold, the Gulf Arab states, which are mainly looking to counter Iran, have established influence in Syria by supporting Turkish and Jordanian efforts to arm rebel factions. When, in the summer of 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama decided not to arm the moderate Syrian opposition, Arab Gulf countries stepped in to directly fund Islamist and moderate groups in Syria. Some of these funds made it into the hands of extremists, which spread rapidly in opposition-controlled areas of Syria.

> *It appears that the Gulf countries mostly support moderate and Islamist factions while tolerating those factions' coordination with jihadists.*

Concerned about the rise of extremists, Gulf Arab countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia publicly supported U.S., Turkish, and Jordanian efforts in 2014 to shut off support to Islamists and jihadists in Syria. Yet since then, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have only increased the money they send to Syria. The exact recipients are unclear, but it appears that the Gulf countries mostly support moderate and Islamist factions while tolerating those factions' coordination with jihadists such Ahrar al-Sham and Nusra in the Jaysh al Fateh, or Army of Conquest. This group has proven a formidable challenge to the Assad regime in northern and southern Syria.

UNMAPPED TERRITORY

The map of Syria is changing by the day. Its neighbors have brought their own political, military, and sectarian tensions to the civil war there, which has made it more complicated and bloody. Despite recent diplomatic overtures, agreement between Iran, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey over what to do in Syria seems unlikely anytime soon, as does a softening of the hardline positions of both the Assad regime and jihadists such as ISIS and Nusra.

But the creation of regional spheres of influence does open some possibilities for diplomacy, something Obama hinted at in his remarks following the Iran deal announcement concerning conversations with Tehran about "a political transition that keeps the country intact and does not further fuel the growth of ISIL and other terrorist organizations." In the short term, neighboring countries and regional forces could use their influence to isolate and punish the most extreme groups in their areas. That would require the White House to orchestrate a balancing act of cutting political deals with neighbors and regional actors on such sticky issues as the role of President Assad, the means of his departure, and what a transition in Syria means. And, in the event an agreement is reached, each country would be given a key role in enforcing it.

In order to open the door for this possibility, the United States needs to recognize that Syria is a broken state that will not be repaired anytime soon—something it has been reticent to do. But recognizing regional spheres of influence in Syria and working with Syria's neighbors (rather than with Russia in yet another top-down attempt at peace talks) to stabilize each piece of the puzzle could well be a vital first step in putting it back together again.

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The Not-So-Great Game in Syria

And How to End It

Andrew J. Tabler

ERIKAWITTLIEB / PIXABAY

In the last few weeks, Russia has returned to the Middle East through a direct military intervention in Syria. In doing so, it has entered the Great Game for the heart of that country and the region. Early speculation that Russia intervened unilaterally to prop up the Bashar al-Assad regime has since been undermined by evidence that Russian air strikes are coordinated with an Iranian-supported regime offensive near Aleppo. In fact, it is likely that a June 2015 visit to Moscow by Qassem Suleimani, leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guard

Corps, was part of the planning for the eventual Iranian-Russian intervention.

Assad apparently invited the Russian strikes, which has given them some degree of legitimacy, as has Moscow's concurrent promotion of negotiations, which started in Vienna last week. But by intervening on behalf of what Russian officials call a "mosaic" of Iranian-supported forces, Moscow has picked a fight with Syria's majority Sunni rebels and their brethren in the region. It has also tripped into other regional players' spheres of influence, including those of Turkey, the Gulf countries, the Kurds, Jordan, and Israel.

Before the Russian intervention, Syria seemed to be turning into Bosnia or Somalia. Now, it could well become another Afghanistan.

KHALIL ASHAWI / REUTERS

A school girl walks past damaged buildings in the rebel-controlled area of Maaret al-Numan town in Idlib province, Syria, October 28, 2015.

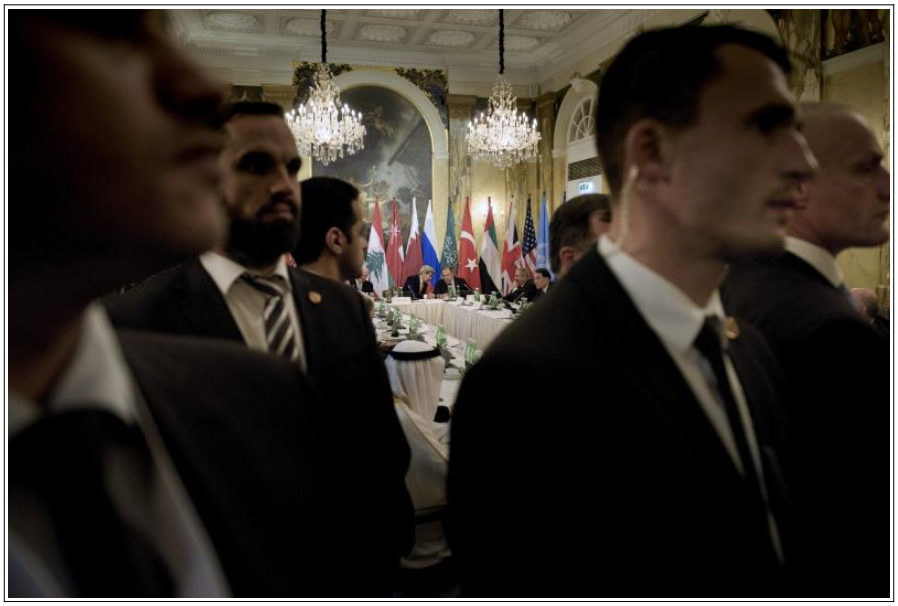
UNBALANCED

Russia’s intervention in Syria is the country’s first direct military engagement in the Middle East (in Egypt’s war of attrition, Soviet pilots flew Egyptian planes; in the 1973 war, the Soviets sent planes but didn't use them). The intervention has primarily consisted of air strikes in areas where the Assad regime had recently been losing ground: north Latakia, the Ghab plain north of Hama, the Rastan pocket north of Homs, and Aleppo. Meanwhile, according to multiple media reports, Iranian, Assad regime, and Hezbollah fighters have started a ground campaign to retake areas in the north lost earlier this year to the so-called Army of Conquest—a patchwork of moderate, Islamist, and al Qaeda–affiliated rebels.

Collectively, the strikes and ground campaign represent a concerted effort to secure three key sites. The first is the Ghab plain, Syria’s most fertile area and the boundary between minority populations on the coast and Syria’s majority Sunni population inland. The second is the M-5 roadway, the transportation spine linking Damascus to Homs, Hama, and the north. The third is the besieged city of Aleppo.

Russian air strikes and the associated Iranian-backed offensive have already collided head-on with Turkish and Arab Gulf spheres of influence in northern Syria. Russia has indicated to Turkey via multiple incursions into Turkish airspace that it regards northern Syria as being in play. Turkey, as Russia has made clear, must rein in its support for rebel groups at the Bab al-Salam border crossing in the north and the Bab al-Hawa crossing to the west. Although Russian strikes have hit a number of groups, the most significant have been against moderate groups backed by the United States, the Saudi-backed Salafist group Ahrar al-Sham, and al Qaeda’s Jabhat al-Nusra. Rebels in the area have tried to stop or slow the regime’s ground offensive using U.S.-made TOW antitank missiles, a weapon rumored to be paid for by Riyadh but that requires Washington’s approval of end users.

The Russian strikes have also altered the balance between Turkey and the Kurds. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party and the political heavyweight behind the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG), is attempting to form a contiguous Kurdish belt, which the YPG calls "Rojava" or "Western Kurdistan," along Syria's northern border. Russia is reportedly keen to support this effort in order to block Russian and Chechen fighters in Syria from returning home via the Caucasus. The PYD, sensing Washington's weak hand, has openly asked for U.S. backing to connect the western Kurdish canton of Afrin to Kobani by seizing the area west of the Euphrates River (which, not incidentally, is where Turkey has said it intends to create a safe zone).



BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / REUTERS

Security staff stand as U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov chat before a meeting with 17 nations, the European Union and United Nations at the Hotel Imperial in Vienna, October 30, 2015.

Washington has encouraged the PYD to focus on working with Arab tribes, Assyrians, and Syriac Christian units under the

umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces in eastern Syria against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS). If the PYD does not receive U.S. support for its unification efforts, though, it could turn to Russia and Iran to close off the belt from the south and cut ISIS off from Turkey. This area is home to a mix of Turkmen, Kurds, and Sunni Arabs, which means that however the situation develops, it is likely to be extremely bloody. The Kurds are strong but likely not strong enough to hold the whole area. ISIS, meanwhile, has long had the region in its cross hairs; ISIS-linked ideologues point to prophecies that in the village of Dabiq, a great battle will take place between an invading “infidel” army that will be turned back by defending Muslims, marking the beginning of the end of the world.

In this conflagration, Russia has been relatively hands-off in southern Syria, with only a few strikes near Tel Harra and Daraa, despite rebel gains there over the last year that have brought them close to Damascus. Southern Syria is split among the Jordanian, Israeli, and Hezbollah spheres of influence, but Israel holds air supremacy in the area. The lack of Russian action there, at least so far, could be the product of a September meeting in Moscow between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The Russians have said they have created a joint antiterror “mechanism” in Amman that might keep Russian planes out of the area, at least for now.

What is still unclear is Russia’s plans for ISIS. That Russia is serious about combating the terrorist group is doubtful, given that 80 percent of Russian air strikes so far have targeted groups other than ISIS. Unless Russia is willing to commit tens of thousands of ground troops, it is unlikely that it (or Assad) will be able to retake and hold Raqqa and the Euphrates valley. In other words, Moscow is in for a long slog in the Syrian quagmire, a point U.S. President Barack Obama has repeated on multiple occasions.

The political basis for an Assad-led transition (or a transition led by any other member of the Assad regime) seems far from clear.

THE DIPLOMATIC GAME

The Russian intervention, nominally meant to fight terrorism, is designed to strengthen Assad's and Iran's hands in the diplomatic game over a political settlement in Syria. The ongoing talks in Vienna are just the latest move in untying what is often referred to as the "Assad knot"—the fraught question of the Syrian president's role in a transition that was outlined in the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, which Russia and the United States negotiated.

At that time, the regime's fall seemed likely, so Western representatives watered down the communiqué's language over Assad's fate to overcome a Russian veto at the United Nations. Instead of demanding that Assad "step aside" as part of a transition, the United States agreed that a "Transitional Governing Body" with "full executive powers" would be formed by "mutual consent." American negotiators argued that the mutual consent clause would give the opposition a veto over Assad's participation in the transitional government. But by not explicitly ruling Assad out of the scheme, and by failing to define which opposition groups had to be consulted, the agreement allowed Assad to stall for time and gave Russia the upper hand.

The political basis for an Assad-led transition (or a transition led by any other member of the Assad regime) seems far from clear. During the last talks in Moscow between the Assad regime and representatives of the opposition, in April, the Russians failed to gain agreement on an antiterrorism platform—mainly because the regime insists on labeling anyone in the opposition as a terrorist. Russia's subsequent air strikes against moderate elements of the Syrian opposition

indicate that Moscow might see the situation in a similar way. Otherwise, it could indicate that when pressed to choose Assad or ISIS, the opposition will opt for the former. The notion of getting the regime and the opposition to bury the hatchet and unite against terrorism is thus a real long shot.

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / REUTERS

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry (R) listen while UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura speaks during a news conference at the Grand Hotel in Vienna, October 30, 2015. U.S. Secretary of State Kerry said he hoped progress could be made at international talks in Vienna aimed at finding a political solution to Syria's four-year-old civil war but it would be very difficult.

YOUR MOVE

The ultimate result of Russia’s intervention in Syria will depend on what domestic actors and their regional supporters do next. The mothballing, but not cancellation, of the U.S. train-and-equip program shortly after Moscow started bombing Syria was just the latest example of Washington’s horrible timing in the Syrian war; the optics are likely to benefit jihadists above all. Washington’s sending of 50 Special Forces to back the PYD-supported Syrian Democratic Forces

against ISIS is unlikely to help the rebels fighting Assad in western Syria and it could create considerable tension between the United States and Turkey. Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, a group of 55 clerics and prominent Islamists signed a statement that called for everything just short of jihad to confront the Russian intervention.

> *Even if Moscow is able to pull a rabbit out of its diplomatic hat and get a process started, it remains far from clear that Tehran would break ranks with the Assad family.*

In other words, Islamist factions such as Ahrar al-Sham could soon be getting much more support. If Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS starts spreading its influence in southern Syria, it could trigger Jordan and Israel to seriously consider the creation of a formal safe or buffer zone in southern Syria. Until now, the two have maintained the status quo with a de facto safe area stretching about 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) into Syria from the Jordanian border. Something deeper would require a more formal arrangement and, likely, a Security Council resolution.

Turkey and the Gulf states have already facilitated the transfer of TOW missiles into Syria, but the real dilemma remains whether and under what circumstances they will provide their allies with antiaircraft capabilities. For years, the Syrian opposition has demanded shoulder-fired man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) to counter the regime aircraft and now Russian jets. But the lack of clear lines of separation among opposition forces and the prevalence of terrorist groups in the opposition have kept MANPADS out of Syria. Meanwhile, direct air support for the opposition from Turkey or Jordan could set the stage for a direct military confrontation between NATO and Russia. If Russia continues to pound opposition positions in the north or expand operations to the south in support of the Assad regime, tens of thousands of refugees could go pouring across

the border, dramatically accelerating plans for the creation of safe areas.

With the victory of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) on November 1, Ankara is likely to viciously fight any PYD attempt to unite the Afrin and Kobani cantons. Turkey would likely combat such a move by supporting Syrian groups in the area along the Marea line, the main supply route from Turkey's Bab al-Salam crossing south to Aleppo. Although it is unlikely, a PYD move en masse could even trigger a direct Turkish military intervention to fight both the YPG and ISIS.

What remains to be seen is how Tehran will react, not so much to Russia's military campaign (from which it has already benefited) but to Russia's attempts to cobble together a broad-based multisectarian transition in Syria. Up to this point, Tehran's support in Syria has been narrowly focused on building up the minority-dominated National Defense Forces and importing Hezbollah fighters as well as Shiite Iraqi and Afghan militias to fight rebels. Iranians say their approach is based on the assumption that the Assad regime is an inverted pyramid—that is, that the whole system would crumble without Assad. Russian officials quietly voice an interest in a transition in which the regime is perserved but Assad at some point exits the scene.

Even if Moscow is able to pull a rabbit out of its diplomatic hat and get a process started, it remains far from clear that Tehran would break ranks with the Assad family. For now, deployment of more Iranian forces to the gates of Aleppo indicate that Tehran is doubling down on Assad yet again, even as its nuclear agreement with Washington brings it in from the cold. Such a development would likely ensure Syria's partition indefinitely, and with it, the Great Game of Syria.

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Syria's Good Neighbors

How Jordan and Lebanon Sheltered Millions of Refugees

David Schenker

MUHAMMAD HAMED / REUTERS

A general view of Azraq refugee camp near Al Azraq city, Jordan, August 19, 2015.

Since the start of the civil war in 2011, nearly four million Syrians have fled their country. Around half a million have sought political asylum in Europe; over the past eight months alone, more than 200,000 Syrians have reached the continent in what one British parliamentarian described as a “tsunami.” To be sure, the number of refugees arriving in Europe is staggering, but it pales in comparison to the numbers who have settled in Jordan and Lebanon.

In the past four years, Jordan, with a pre-refugee population of eight million, and Lebanon, with a population of 4.5 million, have opened their borders to approximately a million and 1.5 million refugees, respectively. They did so despite the fact that Lebanon has a 120 percent debt-to-GDP ratio—among the world's highest—and that Jordan is one of the most water-scarce countries in the world.

Until now, these states have coped surprisingly well with the dramatic and sudden changes to their population. But there are signs that Lebanon and Jordan are about to reach their saturation point. Should the war in Syria and the refugee flows continue, economic and social pressures could destabilize these states.

MANDEL NGAN / REUTERS

An aerial view shows the Zaatari refugee camp, near the Jordanian city of Mafraq, July 18, 2013.

STRUGGLING IN JORDAN

Jordan has a long and distinguished history of hosting

refugees. An estimated 60 percent of the kingdom's citizens are of Palestinian origin—refugees (and their descendants) from the 1948 and 1967 wars with Israel. Although some institutional biases in employment and electoral politics persist, Palestinians have largely been integrated into Jordanian society. Several hundred thousand Iraqis likewise reside in the country. The first wave arrived in 1991, followed by a large contingent after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

But Jordan's one million new Syrian arrivals constitute a unique challenge. A small portion—fewer than 120,000—live in the two available refugee camps. The larger of these camps, known as Zaatari, has gradually transformed into a permanent settlement and, with 80,000 residents, is now Jordan's fourth-largest city. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the refugees are dispersed throughout the state and are profoundly straining the Kingdom's perennially anemic economy, in which job creation is a significant problem.

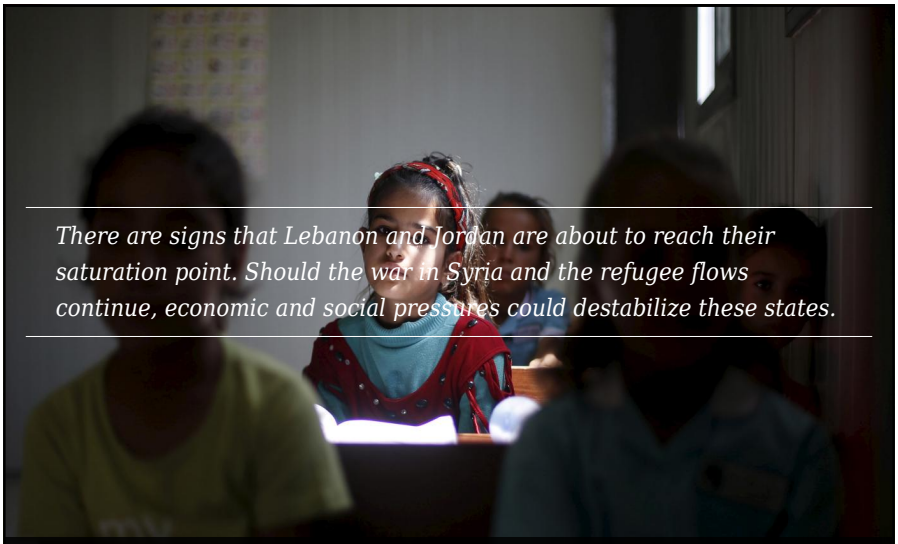
Officially, unemployment is about 12 percent, a number much worse when one considers the low rate of workforce participation, which is 36 percent. Among young people, unemployment has reached 30 percent. Not surprisingly, the addition of hundreds of thousands of Syrians to the job market is increasing unemployment among Jordanians still further, as businesses replace locals, who must receive a minimum wage of $268 per month, with cheaper Syrian labor. According to the International Labor Organization, in areas with high concentrations of Syrian refugees, unemployment among Jordanians has risen to 22 percent.

Syrian refugees have put pressure on Jordan's housing market, too. The demand for housing has pushed up rents. Earlier this year, a Jordanian taxi driver complained to me that his lease payment on his small apartment in the working-class neighborhood of East Amman had doubled to 200 Jordanian dinars ($282) a month. The cost of food has also

risen. And today, according to the World Bank, nearly a third of the Kingdom's citizens are, at some point during the year, impoverished. Consistent with these developments, a poll released in June conducted by the Amman-based Phenix Center for Economics and Informatics Studies indicated that 57 percent of Jordanians see the economy as "bad" or "very bad." It's even worse for the Syrians. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) reported this month that 86 percent of refugees living outside the camps fall below the poverty line.

Access to public resources, particularly primary education, is another concern. Before the war in Syria began, for example, the northern Jordanian town of Mafraq, located just ten miles from the Syrian border, had a population of 80,000. By 2014, it had swelled to 200,000. To deal with the influx, in Mafraq and elsewhere in Jordan, public schools now offer two different teaching sessions: Jordanian children receive their lessons in the morning and Syrian students in the afternoon.

Given the economic and social stresses, there have been surprisingly few incidents of violence reported thus far, even though they do still occur. Two years ago, in the tribal governorate of Tafilah, a Syrian attacked and killed a Jordanian man. In the assault's aftermath, Tafilah residents rioted and subsequently expelled seven hundred Syrian refugees from the town. More recently, in March, reports of a Jordanian woman slapping and insulting an "Arab" (i.e., Syrian) male who had verbally harassed her went viral.



There are signs that Lebanon and Jordan are about to reach their saturation point. Should the war in Syria and the refugee flows continue, economic and social pressures could destabilize these states.

Muhammad Hamed / Reuters
Syrian refugee children sit in a classroom at a newly opened remedial education center in Azraq refugee camp in Jordan, August 19, 2015.

BACKLASH IN LEBANON

In Lebanon, where Syrian refugees now constitute a quarter of the population, the current problems and future prospects are even worse. Lebanon, too, has a long history of accommodating refugees. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, 100,000 Palestinians fled to the country. Today, about 450,000 of these refugees and their descendants reside in 12 camps throughout the state because, unlike Jordan, Lebanon blocked Palestinian integration, fearing that the mostly Sunni refugees would skew the country's delicate sectarian balance of Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians. At that time, Lebanon issued draconian laws that, for more than 60 years, have prevented Palestinians from working and owning property. Today, Lebanon's Palestinians represent a permanent and increasingly frustrated and radicalized underclass.

The arrival of 1.5 million mostly Sunni Syrian refugees has led to similar discriminatory policies. According to Lebanese law, Syrians in Lebanon are required to obtain a $200 six-month residency permit that excludes them from work. Although

many of the refugees do work illegally, their income, according to the International Labor Organization, is 40 percent less than the mandated $448 per month Lebanese minimum wage. Meanwhile, unemployment among the Lebanese has doubled, reaching 24 percent total and 35 percent among youth. According to official government figures, poverty among Lebanese has also increased by two-thirds over the past four years.

Some 86 percent of Lebanon's Syrians live in poor villages, with little opportunity for employment or education. Nearly half reportedly live in unfinished buildings, empty stores, parking lots, and on the margins of agricultural fields—including in predominantly Shiite areas like the Bekaa Valley. Beirut is now teeming with homeless Syrians. Young refugees are everywhere: begging and selling flowers, tissues, and packs of Chiclets on the streets. Beirut reports that petty crime is up by 60 percent and that 26 percent of Lebanon's prison population now consists of Syrian nationals, picked up for robbery, vagrancy, or working illegally. Now, months into the state's garbage crisis, in which political gridlock paralyzed the government and prevented it from performing basic services such as trash collection, the World Health Organization is warning that the unsanitary conditions could result in a cholera epidemic among the refugees.

ALI HASHISHO / REUTERS

A Syrian refugee boy holds balloons for sale in the port-city of Sidon, southern Lebanon, September 22, 2015.

Unlike in Jordan, the deluge of Syrians has triggered a strong backlash in Lebanon. Towns throughout Lebanon have introduced curfews on “foreign” residents. Human Rights Watch has reported rising violence against Syrian refugees, and other NGOs have noted an epidemic of sexual and gender-based violence against the community. This violence stems, in part, from the Lebanese fear that some of the refugees may be a part of Islamic State (also known as ISIS) “sleeper cells,” poised to wreak havoc in Lebanon. The Lebanese press is replete with reports about these cells. Earlier this month, Lebanese Minister of Education Elias Bou Saab echoed these fears, suggesting that as many as two percent of the refugees might be “radicals” bent on perpetrating jihad in their new home.

At the same time, the refugee presence has exacerbated existing sectarian tensions. Since 2011, the Lebanese Shiite

militia Hezbollah has been fighting in Syria to support the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which to date has killed nearly 300,000 mostly Sunni Muslims. Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has infuriated Sunnis, Lebanese, and Syrians alike, provoking a spate of 16 car bombings against sectarian targets a little more than a year ago.

On top of these micro-level changes, refugees are also taxing Lebanon's infrastructure—particularly its electric, water, and education systems—and depleting national finances. Both Jordan and Lebanon will run extensive budget deficits in 2015 as a result of refugee expenditures and other Syria-related revenue losses, such as in trade and tourism. Even if Jordan receives all of its anticipated international refugee assistance—which is far from certain since donor funds have been steadily dwindling—the state will overspend by $660 million, or by five percent of its $11.4 billion budget. Lebanon's projected 33 percent deficit of $5.1 billion is even starker, especially given the current national debt crisis.

To a large extent, budget deficits in Jordan and Lebanon are the result of insufficient international financial assistance.

DONOR FATIGUE

To a large extent, budget deficits in Jordan and Lebanon are the result of insufficient international financial assistance. Last year, the United Nations appealed for $4.5 billion in donations to provide critical food and other aid to vulnerable Syrian refugees throughout the region. To date, however, the UN has met only 37 percent of this goal, and the largest funding gaps, according to UNHCR, remain in Lebanon and Jordan. For example, Jordan has received just $466 million of the $1.19 billion that the UN determined Amman needs to accommodate the refugees, and Lebanon has collected just $649 million of $1.97 billion.

The funding shortfall has had serious repercussions for the refugees. This summer, World Food Program (WFP) subsidies to needy refugees in the region were slashed. In some cases, assistance was reduced by half, to just $14 per month; in other cases, the stipend was cut entirely. Earlier this month, the WFP notified over 200,000 refugees in Jordan via text message that their food aid would be zeroed out. Donor fatigue and the surge of Syrian refugees to European shores will likely accentuate the downward trend in funding.

Given the dire financial situation of the refugees and the inadequacy of foreign assistance, it comes as little surprise that Jordan and Lebanon have taken steps to curtail the influx. In recent months, Jordan has limited the flow of Syrians to a trickle, and it is now floating the idea of sectioning off a part of southern Syria and creating a humanitarian and military safe zone. Meanwhile, Beirut has raised the bureaucratic bar for residency so high that Syrians are reportedly now fleeing for more hospitable destinations. In some cases, middle-class Syrian refugees are risking their lives to reach Europe, and leaving sanctuary in Jordan and Lebanon to do so. The choice suggests that these states offer little opportunity and poor quality of life to Syrians.

AHMAD SHALHA / REUTERS

Children walk inside a makeshift settlement for Syrian refugees on the outskirts of Arsal, Lebanon, March 15, 2015.

ROOTS AND NO RETURN

The sad reality is that many if not most of these refugees will never return to Syria. Given the level of destruction—nearly half of all Syrian housing has been demolished—there would be little to return to. Even if Assad is eventually vanquished, the war will most likely continue as a new battle between the various Sunni militias.

Although UNHCR and other international organizations don't readily admit it, according to the Oxford Centre for Refugee Studies, "when displacement has been prolonged, many refugees have become established in their new place of settlement and their desire or willingness to return may diminish." In short, refugees who spend a decade or more outside their countries of origin seldom repatriate. The longer the fighting continues, the more likely these refugees will put

down roots, never to return.

In the months ahead, Syrians who have the wherewithal will continue to seek European shores hoping to reestablish a middle-class existence. Europe may eventually manage this influx, absorb the refugees, and even benefit from the younger population. Yet for those who can’t afford the perilous journey, Jordan and Lebanon will remain the destination of last resort. These states have demonstrated aptitude for muddling through adversity, but the economic and social pressures on Jordan and Lebanon may soon prove too much for even these resilient states.

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No (Gulf) Country for Syrian Refugees

The Kafala System and the Migration Crisis

Michael Ewers and Justin Gengler

ALI HASHISHO / REUTERS

A Syrian refugee girl stands behind a door at a makeshift settlement in the village of Ketermaya, south of Beirut January 8, 2015.

A common reaction to the ongoing migrant crisis has been to blame Europe: how can the wealthy nations of western Europe allow such a tragedy? More recently, however, media and popular scrutiny have turned back toward the Middle East—not to the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria or the Islamic State (also called ISIS) but to the wealthy petro-states of the Arab Gulf. The Chicago Tribune asks, "Why don't Gulf

states accept more refugees?" USA Today reports, "Gulf states idle as migrant crisis swells in Europe." The most direct accusation comes from The Washington Post: "The Arab world's wealthiest nations are doing next to nothing for Syria's refugees."

Gulf governments and citizens have largely dismissed the criticism, citing the more than $2 billion they have donated in humanitarian aid and the tens of thousands of Syrians—not to mention Egyptians, Yemenis, and other Arabs—who have found political and economic refuge in the Gulf (even if not as formal refugees) since the region started to destabilize in 2011. Yet even in their rejection of critics' specific claims, many Gulf representatives have acknowledged that their countries are more inclined to help from a distance than to open their tightly restricted borders to migrants, Arabs or not. "Our countries are only fit for workers," as one Kuwaiti official put it in a candid discussion with France 24television on September 2. "We don't want people who suffer from internal stress and trauma in our country!"

Observers have been quick to point out the unfortunate irony of the situation: Gulf leaders are unwilling to risk their own political and economic stability by taking in individuals displaced by the very conflicts and proxy wars they themselves continue to fuel with money and arms. Or less cynically, Gulf leaders are limited by the legal ambiguity of refugees in the Gulf countries. None of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—is a signatory of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. By this latter view, then, the question is how Gulf governments can be expected to offer asylum to a class of individuals whom they do not even recognize.

Both lines of reasoning, while simplistic, contain kernels of a much larger truth: the fundamental incompatibility of the Gulf

political-economic model with the category of refugee. That the Gulf states, despite their vast wealth and resources, have not formally taken on asylum seekers from Syria or elsewhere owes to the nature of the ubiquitous kafala ("sponsorship") system, the vast labyrinth of legislation that governs the employment and sponsorship of migrant workers in the GCC and preserves the status of foreigners as (in principle) temporary and separate from domestic populations.

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / REUTERS

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry waits to board his plane at King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah, September 12, 2014. Kerry announced on Friday nearly $500 million in humanitarian aid for people and countries hit by Syria's civil war.

The kafala is an inelegant solution to reconcile the often competing interests of distinct societal constituencies: ordinary Gulf citizens, who remain wary of cultural encroachment and desirous of the benefits of an advanced rentier economy; and business and political elites, who seek to balance migrant-fueled economic growth and profits with concerns over potential social alienation and eventual

political discontent. The system, which is today facing intense criticism over the conditions of workers laying the groundwork for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, deserves equal attention for those whom excludes altogether, in the strict legal sense but also structurally.

KAFALA IS KING

Since the onset of commercial production of oil in the mid–twentieth century, the Arab Gulf countries, with their small native populations, have need to import high- and low-skilled workers. Initially viewed as a necessary but temporary solution, foreign labor has remained instrumental in creating and maintaining the modern physical and social infrastructure of the twenty-first-century Gulf. During the 1970s, much of this foreign work force was Arab and hailed from the oil-poor, labor-abundant countries of the Middle East and North Africa, such as Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. But over time, two factors made Arabs relatively less desirable.

First, spurred by leftist movements, Arab workers began to demand greater political and economic inclusion in the Gulf states, including a path toward citizenship. But in the rentier state, more citizens means a dilution of the financial resources enjoyed by rulers and (partly) distributed to nationals, so this idea was a nonstarter. Today, citizenship remains a virtual impossibility for foreigners in the Gulf, regardless of national origin or skill level. Qatar, for instance, legally caps naturalization at 50 individuals a year; other states impose similar formal or informal restrictions.

Second, and equally important, foreign Arab workers came to be viewed as more politically active than native Gulf Arabs. They were seen as particularly inclined toward Nasserism and other pan-Arab ideologies and were, therefore, a dangerous influence on citizens. For instance, the spread of Arab nationalism among Kuwaitis in the 1950s and 1960s

prompted the government to begin a program of mass naturalization of some 200,000 Bedouins from the neighboring deserts to serve as a dependable pro-government bloc in an increasingly oppositional parliament. Apprehensions about foreign influence were further borne out in the minds of Gulf rulers in 1991, when Kuwait accused Palestinian workers in the country of supporting the invasion of Arab nationalist Saddam Hussein. After the war, Kuwait expelled half a million Palestinians. Saudi Arabia likewise expelled approximately one million Yemeni workers after former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh came out in support of Iraq.

MOHAMED AL-SAYAGHI / REUTERS

Internally displaced people play football in a school in Sanaa May 17, 2015. Residents were forced to leave their homes in the nearby province of Saada amid Saudi-led air strikes.

These same factors that made Arab workers less desirable made South Asian workers more attractive. Asian workers had lower wage expectations and no misgivings about citizenship or societal integration. Although many of the Asian

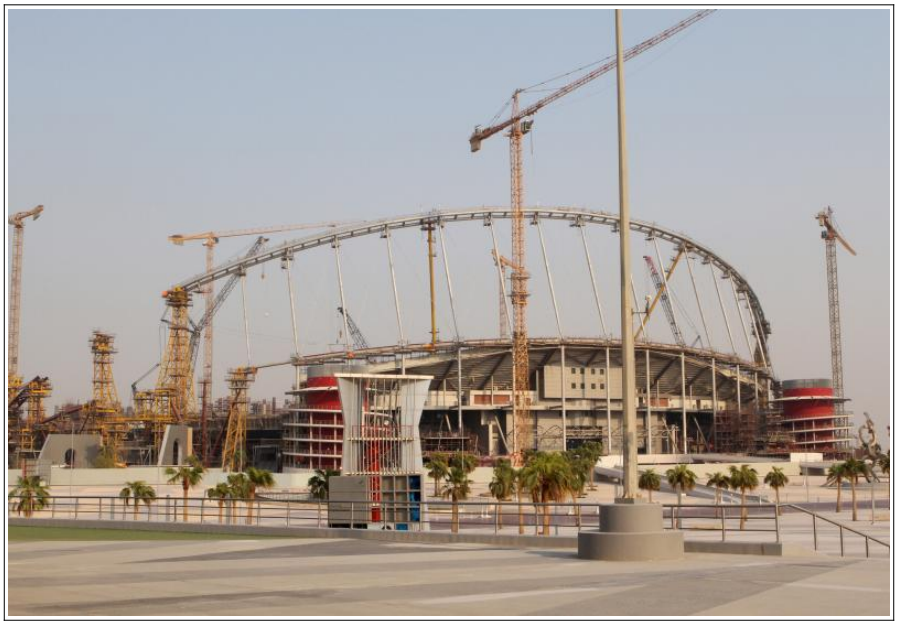
workers shared Islam as a religion (which helped to alleviate concerns about cultural encroachment), they were viewed as less likely to be politically active or potential recruits for Arab-dominated leftist and Islamist movements. As one Syrian professor living in Qatar told us, "[Gulf leaders] know the Indians come here, do work, and don't cause trouble. This is just how they like it."

The modern kafala system has further solidified the role of Asian workers in the Gulf by encouraging the development of transnational networks linking the Gulf labor markets to labor pools in migrant-sending countries. Today, a vast enterprise ensures the flow of workers to the Gulf through international recruitment agencies with dedicated airline routes, control over segments of the Gulf real estate market, and access to local ethnic economies, which have evolved to cater to the specific national and regional tastes of particular groups. Such corporations have strong economic incentives to resist a return to the Middle East as the Gulf’s primary labor pool.

As a result of the kafala, the Gulf labor market is a carefully constructed but delicately balanced system—a migrant division of labor—in which particular nationalities are matched to particular types of occupations and are paid largely according to their passports. The system is viewed as economically productive and politically viable but demographically precarious. Keeping the kafala system in balance is a task Gulf governments take very seriously. In 2013, for instance, amid declining oil revenues and rising discontent over unemployment, Saudi Arabia expelled some 300,000 Yemenis, ostensibly for overstaying their visas or illegally taking on a second job. In 2014, Oman, bowing to similar pressures, announced new regulations and redoubled enforcement of existing laws aimed at reducing non-nationals to one-third of the population.

ARAB ACCEPTANCE

Delicate economic balance aside, the notion of replacing some low-skill Asian and high-skill Western migrants with foreign Arabs—of reversing the geographic trend of the past several decades—would seem to make sense from at least one angle: societal cohesion. The majority of Gulf nationals remain culturally and religiously conservative and are concerned about the potential erosion of traditional identity and values. Many also worry about Western political and military intentions in the region, feelings only magnified by the recent U.S.- and European-led rapprochement with Iran. The upshot is latent and sometimes open tension among various social groupings in Gulf societies, both in public and in the workplace.



NASEEM ZEITOON / REUTERS

Construction work goes on at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha, Qatar September 16, 2015. The stadium is being renovated to accommodate 40,000 spectators and is expected to host soccer matches during the 2022 World Cup.

And, indeed, opinion surveys of Gulf nationals consistently point to greater acceptance of Arabs from other Middle East and North African countries than of those from other

nationality groups. For instance, a 2012 study conducted by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) at Qatar University found that a full 82 percent of Qataris agreed that “the growing number of non-Arab workers threatens traditional Qatari customs and values.” Only 45 percent agreed when posed the same question about foreign Arab workers. Respondents were asked additionally, “How many workers from Arab countries outside of the Gulf do you think Qatar should allow to come to work here in Qatar?” Far more than for any other group, 38 percent of Qataris said to “allow many” and 47 percent said to “allow some” Arab workers. By contrast, only 12 percent wanted the state to “allow many” Asian workers, this proportion dropping further to ten percent for American and European workers and six percent for workers from sub-Saharan Africa.

In a separate survey conducted in 2014, SESRI found that Qatari citizens “trust” or “highly trust” Arab expatriates (88 percent) more than any other group save for other Qataris (95 percent). Western expatriates and individuals from the Indian subcontinent, on the other hand, received far lower trust ratings, at 46 percent and 50 percent, respectively.

A PLACE FOR US

It might be, then, that Gulf governments’ historical fears over the political activism of Arab expatriates are today mitigated—perhaps even outweighed—by countervailing public concerns about non-Arab foreign workers. Yet even with such a changing political calculus, there are enormous structural economic impediments to accepting significant numbers of Arab workers, refugees or not. To take the case of Syrian asylum seekers, individuals would be unlikely to accept the wages or conditions of existing low-skilled migrants from South Asia and are a socially unacceptable (and in some Gulf countries legally proscribed) choice for domestic helpers, such as nannies, cooks, and drivers.

REUTERS

Laborers are pictured in a foreign workers dormitory in the Sanaya Industrial Area in Doha, during a government-guided tour, May 3, 2015. The Qatari government on Sunday conducted the tour of four foreign workers' dormitories, including two newly built by the government, to show their living conditions.

Presumably, then, if not qualified to work as high-skilled professionals like teachers or nurses, unwilling to work as manual laborers, and not permitted to work as low-wage domestic servants, most refugees would probably fit somewhere in the vast middle of semiskilled trade occupations, such as oil field and construction work. Unfortunately, the timing for this sector could not be worse. In Qatar, for instance, hydrocarbon revenues are predicted to fall by a third in 2015. Qatar Petroleum has begun a restructuring project that will cut thousands of jobs, including those of hundreds of nationals. The company also recently scrapped a proposed $6.4 billion petrochemical project with Shell. The demand for oil workers in the Gulf, skilled or unskilled, is on the decline. Moreover, an economic decline in energy is likely to spell a decline across many industries,

particularly the very service sector that is well positioned to absorb Arab expatriates.

An entirely separate consideration is the strain that additional population influxes would have on existing resources in these rapidly growing countries. Incorporating 30,000 refugees into the Gulf city-states is a much larger task than in Germany, a country of 80 million. And whereas workers in the oil industry may already be leaving, many others are arriving arriving amid a World Cup building frenzy that is poised only to accelerate in the lead-up to 2022. With the population growing at a rate of over 7.5 percent annually, Qatar and its capital, Doha, have struggled to keep up with new arrivals. Public health and education services are already under heavy strain, and stadium construction has brought traffic to a near standstill. Finally, a great deal of effort goes into the screening of workers, including medical examinations, police background checks, and document attestation. These rules would need to be significantly altered to allow for the mass acceptance of refugees.

In short, a growing chorus of citizens and commentators have called on Gulf governments to provide Syrian and other refugees with dignified work in the region's rapidly expanding economies. But it is unclear where exactly these individuals would fit in the Gulf's highly structured and segmented labor markets, markets that in actuality are more likely to contract than expand absent a dramatic reversal in oil prices. The GCC states are therefore likely to follow their intuition about the potential challenge to social and political stability posed by a mass influx of refugees: stability not mainly in terms of unwelcome political activism, but with a view toward preserving the carefully constructed political-economic status quo enshrined in the kafala.

Of course, it may be that the sustained media attention and criticism will prompt one or more of the Gulf governments to

change course. Perhaps even tomorrow, a Gulf leader will announce that he has accepted one million Syrian refugees, to live in contained, air-conditioned camps in the desert while receiving generous state support. Yet it is clear that such a decision will have been either a shrewd diplomatic move or an act of pure altruism. For there is no place for refugees in the kafala.

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ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group

Why Counterterrorism Won’t Stop the Latest Jihadist Threat

Audrey Kurth Cronin

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On a roll: an ISIS fighter in Raqqa, Syria, June 2014.

After 9/11, many within the U.S. national security establishment worried that, following decades of preparation for confronting conventional enemies, Washington was unready for the challenge posed by an unconventional adversary such as al Qaeda. So over the next decade, the United States built an elaborate bureaucratic structure to fight the jihadist organization, adapting its military and its intelligence and law enforcement agencies to the tasks of

counterterrorism and counterinsurgency.

Now, however, a different group, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which also calls itself the Islamic State, has supplanted al Qaeda as the jihadist threat of greatest concern. ISIS' ideology, rhetoric, and long-term goals are similar to al Qaeda's, and the two groups were once formally allied. So many observers assume that the current challenge is simply to refocus Washington's now-formidable counterterrorism apparatus on a new target.

But ISIS is not al Qaeda. It is not an outgrowth or a part of the older radical Islamist organization, nor does it represent the next phase in its evolution. Although al Qaeda remains dangerous—especially its affiliates in North Africa and Yemen—ISIS is its successor. ISIS represents the post–al Qaeda jihadist threat.

In a nationally televised speech last September explaining his plan to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS, U.S. President Barack Obama drew a straight line between the group and al Qaeda and claimed that ISIS is "a terrorist organization, pure and simple." This was mistaken; ISIS hardly fits that description, and indeed, although it uses terrorism as a tactic, it is not really a terrorist organization at all. Terrorist networks, such as al Qaeda, generally have only dozens or hundreds of members, attack civilians, do not hold territory, and cannot directly confront military forces. ISIS, on the other hand, boasts some 30,000 fighters, holds territory in both Iraq and Syria, maintains extensive military capabilities, controls lines of communication, commands infrastructure, funds itself, and engages in sophisticated military operations. If ISIS is purely and simply anything, it is a pseudo-state led by a conventional army. And that is why the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies that greatly diminished the threat from al Qaeda will not work against ISIS.

Washington has been slow to adapt its policies in Iraq and Syria to the true nature of the threat from ISIS. In Syria, U.S. counterterrorism has mostly prioritized the bombing of al Qaeda affiliates, which has given an edge to ISIS and has also provided the Assad regime with the opportunity to crush U.S.-allied moderate Syrian rebels. In Iraq, Washington continues to rely on a form of counterinsurgency, depending on the central government in Baghdad to regain its lost legitimacy, unite the country, and build indigenous forces to defeat ISIS. These approaches were developed to meet a different threat, and they have been overtaken by events. What's needed now is a strategy of "offensive containment": a combination of limited military tactics and a broad diplomatic strategy to halt ISIS' expansion, isolate the group, and degrade its capabilities.

DIFFERENT STROKES

The differences between al Qaeda and ISIS are partly rooted in their histories. Al Qaeda came into being in the aftermath of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Its leaders' worldviews and strategic thinking were shaped by the ten-year war against Soviet occupation, when thousands of Muslim militants, including Osama bin Laden, converged on the country. As the organization coalesced, it took the form of a global network focused on carrying out spectacular attacks against Western or Western-allied targets, with the goal of rallying Muslims to join a global confrontation with secular powers near and far.

ISIS came into being thanks to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. In its earliest incarnation, it was just one of a number of Sunni extremist groups fighting U.S. forces and attacking Shiite civilians in an attempt to foment a sectarian civil war. At that time, it was called al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and its leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had pledged allegiance to bin Laden. Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. air strike in 2006, and soon after, AQI was nearly wiped out when Sunni tribes

decided to partner with the Americans to confront the jihadists. But the defeat was temporary; AQI renewed itself inside U.S.-run prisons in Iraq, where insurgents and terrorist operatives connected and formed networks—and where the group's current chief and self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, first distinguished himself as a leader.

In 2011, as a revolt against the Assad regime in Syria expanded into a full-blown civil war, the group took advantage of the chaos, seizing territory in Syria's northeast, establishing a base of operations, and rebranding itself as ISIS. In Iraq, the group continued to capitalize on the weakness of the central state and to exploit the country's sectarian strife, which intensified after U.S. combat forces withdrew. With the Americans gone, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki pursued a hard-line pro-Shiite agenda, further alienating Sunni Arabs throughout the country. ISIS now counts among its members Iraqi Sunni tribal leaders, former anti-U.S. insurgents, and even secular former Iraqi military officers who seek to regain the power and security they enjoyed during the Saddam Hussein era.

The group's territorial conquest in Iraq came as a shock. When ISIS captured Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014, most analysts predicted that the U.S.-trained Iraqi security forces would contain the threat. But in June, amid mass desertions from the Iraqi army, ISIS moved toward Baghdad, capturing Mosul, Tikrit, al-Qaim, and numerous other Iraqi towns. By the end of the month, ISIS had renamed itself the Islamic State and had proclaimed the territory under its control to be a new caliphate. Meanwhile, according to U.S. intelligence estimates, some 15,000 foreign fighters from 80 countries flocked to the region to join ISIS, at the rate of around 1,000 per month. Although most of these recruits came from Muslim-majority countries, such as Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, some also hailed from Australia, China, Russia, and western European countries. ISIS has even managed to

attract some American teenagers, boys and girls alike, from ordinary middle-class homes in Denver, Minneapolis, and the suburbs of Chicago.

As ISIS has grown, its goals and intentions have become clearer. Al Qaeda conceived of itself as the vanguard of a global insurgency mobilizing Muslim communities against secular rule. ISIS, in contrast, seeks to control territory and create a “pure” Sunni Islamist state governed by a brutal interpretation of sharia; to immediately obliterate the political borders of the Middle East that were created by Western powers in the twentieth century; and to position itself as the sole political, religious, and military authority over all of the world’s Muslims.

NOT THE USUAL SUSPECTS

Since ISIS’ origins and goals differ markedly from al Qaeda’s, the two groups operate in completely different ways. That is why a U.S. counterterrorism strategy custom-made to fight al Qaeda does not fit the struggle against ISIS.

In the post-9/11 era, the United States has built up a trillion-dollar infrastructure of intelligence, law enforcement, and military operations aimed at al Qaeda and its affiliates. According to a 2010 investigation by The Washington Post, some 263 U.S. government organizations were created or reorganized in response to the 9/11 attacks, including the Department of Homeland Security, the National Counterterrorism Center, and the Transportation Security Administration. Each year, U.S. intelligence agencies produce some 50,000 reports on terrorism. Fifty-one U.S. federal organizations and military commands track the flow of money to and from terrorist networks. This structure has helped make terrorist attacks on U.S. soil exceedingly rare. In that sense, the system has worked. But it is not well suited for dealing with ISIS, which presents a different sort of challenge.

Consider first the tremendous U.S. military and intelligence campaign to capture or kill al Qaeda's core leadership through drone strikes and Special Forces raids. Some 75 percent of the leaders of the core al Qaeda group have been killed by raids and armed drones, a technology well suited to the task of going after targets hiding in rural areas, where the risk of accidentally killing civilians is lower.

Such tactics, however, don't hold much promise for combating ISIS. The group's fighters and leaders cluster in urban areas, where they are well integrated into civilian populations and usually surrounded by buildings, making drone strikes and raids much harder to carry out. And simply killing ISIS' leaders would not cripple the organization. They govern a functioning pseudo-state with a complex administrative structure. At the top of the military command is the emirate, which consists of Baghdadi and two deputies, both of whom formerly served as generals in the Saddam-era Iraqi army: Abu Ali al-Anbari, who controls ISIS' operations in Syria, and Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, who controls operations in Iraq. ISIS' civilian bureaucracy is supervised by 12 administrators who govern territories in Iraq and Syria, overseeing councils that handle matters such as finances, media, and religious affairs. Although it is hardly the model government depicted in ISIS' propaganda videos, this pseudo-state would carry on quite ably without Baghdadi or his closest lieutenants.

ISIS also poses a daunting challenge to traditional U.S. counterterrorism tactics that take aim at jihadist financing, propaganda, and recruitment. Cutting off al Qaeda's funding has been one of U.S. counterterrorism's most impressive success stories. Soon after the 9/11 attacks, the FBI and the CIA began to coordinate closely on financial intelligence, and they were soon joined by the Department of Defense. FBI agents embedded with U.S. military units during the 2003 invasion of Iraq and debriefed suspected terrorists detained

at the U.S. facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. In 2004, the U.S. Treasury Department established the Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, which has cut deeply into al Qaeda's ability to profit from money laundering and receive funds under the cover of charitable giving. A global network for countering terrorist financing has also emerged, backed by the UN, the EU, and hundreds of cooperating governments. The result has been a serious squeeze on al Qaeda's financing; by 2011, the Treasury Department reported that al Qaeda was "struggling to secure steady financing to plan and execute terrorist attacks."

But such tools contribute little to the fight against ISIS, because ISIS does not need outside funding. Holding territory has allowed the group to build a self-sustaining financial model unthinkable for most terrorist groups. Beginning in 2012, ISIS gradually took over key oil assets in eastern Syria; it now controls an estimated 60 percent of the country's oil production capacity. Meanwhile, during its push into Iraq last summer, ISIS also seized seven oil-producing operations in that country. The group manages to sell some of this oil on the black market in Iraq and Syria—including, according to some reports, to the Assad regime itself. ISIS also smuggles oil out of Iraq and Syria into Jordan and Turkey, where it finds plenty of buyers happy to pay below-market prices for illicit crude. All told, ISIS' revenue from oil is estimated to be between $1 million and $3 million per day.

And oil is only one element in the group's financial portfolio. Last June, when ISIS seized control of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, it looted the provincial central bank and other smaller banks and plundered antiquities to sell on the black market. It steals jewelry, cars, machinery, and livestock from conquered residents. The group also controls major transportation arteries in western Iraq, allowing it to tax the movement of goods and charge tolls. It even earns revenue from cotton and wheat grown in Raqqa, the breadbasket of

Syria.

Of course, like terrorist groups, ISIS also takes hostages, demanding tens of millions of dollars in ransom payments. But more important to the group's finances is a wide-ranging extortion racket that targets owners and producers in ISIS territory, taxing everything from small family farms to large enterprises such as cell-phone service providers, water delivery companies, and electric utilities. The enterprise is so complex that the U.S. Treasury has declined to estimate ISIS' total assets and revenues, but ISIS is clearly a highly diversified enterprise whose wealth dwarfs that of any terrorist organization. And there is little evidence that Washington has succeeded in reducing the group's coffers.

SEX AND THE SINGLE JIHADIST

Another aspect of U.S. counterterrorism that has worked well against al Qaeda is the effort to delegitimize the group by publicizing its targeting errors and violent excesses—or by helping U.S. allies do so. Al Qaeda's attacks frequently kill Muslims, and the group's leaders are highly sensitive to the risk this poses to their image as the vanguard of a mass Muslim movement. Attacks in Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey in 2003; Spain in 2004; and Jordan and the United Kingdom in 2005 all resulted in Muslim casualties that outraged members of Islamic communities everywhere and reduced support for al Qaeda across the Muslim world. The group has steadily lost popular support since around 2007; today, al Qaeda is widely reviled in the Muslim world. The Pew Research Center surveyed nearly 9,000 Muslims in 11 countries in 2013 and found a high median level of disapproval of al Qaeda: 57 percent. In many countries, the number was far higher: 96 percent of Muslims polled in Lebanon, 81 percent in Jordan, 73 percent in Turkey, and 69 percent in Egypt held an unfavorable view of al Qaeda.

ISIS, however, seems impervious to the risk of a backlash. In

proclaiming himself the caliph, Baghdadi made a bold (if absurd) claim to religious authority. But ISIS' core message is about raw power and revenge, not legitimacy. Its brutality—videotaped beheadings, mass executions—is designed to intimidate foes and suppress dissent. Revulsion among Muslims at such cruelty might eventually undermine ISIS. But for the time being, Washington's focus on ISIS' savagery only helps the group augment its aura of strength.

For similar reasons, it has proved difficult for the United States and its partners to combat the recruitment efforts that have attracted so many young Muslims to ISIS' ranks. The core al Qaeda group attracted followers with religious arguments and a pseudo-scholarly message of altruism for the sake of the ummah, the global Muslim community. Bin Laden and his longtime second-in-command and successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, carefully constructed an image of religious legitimacy and piety. In their propaganda videos, the men appeared as ascetic warriors, sitting on the ground in caves, studying in libraries, or taking refuge in remote camps. Although some of al Qaeda's affiliates have better recruiting pitches, the core group cast the establishment of a caliphate as a long-term, almost utopian goal: educating and mobilizing the ummah came first. In al Qaeda, there is no place for alcohol or women. In this sense, al Qaeda's image is deeply unsexy; indeed, for the young al Qaeda recruit, sex itself comes only after marriage—or martyrdom.

Even for the angriest young Muslim man, this might be a bit of a hard sell. Al Qaeda's leaders' attempts to depict themselves as moral—even moralistic—figures have limited their appeal. Successful deradicalization programs in places such as Indonesia and Singapore have zeroed in on the mismatch between what al Qaeda offers and what most young people are really interested in, encouraging militants to reintegrate into society, where their more prosaic hopes and desires might be fulfilled more readily.

ISIS, in contrast, offers a very different message for young men, and sometimes women. The group attracts followers yearning for not only religious righteousness but also adventure, personal power, and a sense of self and community. And, of course, some people just want to kill—and ISIS welcomes them, too. The group's brutal violence attracts attention, demonstrates dominance, and draws people to the action.

ISIS operates in urban settings and offers recruits immediate opportunities to fight. It advertises by distributing exhilarating podcasts produced by individual fighters on the frontlines. The group also procures sexual partners for its male recruits; some of these women volunteer for this role, but most of them are coerced or even enslaved. The group barely bothers to justify this behavior in religious terms; its sales pitch is conquest in all its forms, including the sexual kind. And it has already established a self-styled caliphate, with Baghdadi as the caliph, thus making present (if only in a limited way, for now) what al Qaeda generally held out as something more akin to a utopian future.

In short, ISIS offers short-term, primitive gratification. It does not radicalize people in ways that can be countered by appeals to logic. Teenagers are attracted to the group without even understanding what it is, and older fighters just want to be associated with ISIS' success. Compared with fighting al Qaeda's relatively austere message, Washington has found it much harder to counter ISIS' more visceral appeal, perhaps for a very simple reason: a desire for power, agency, and instant results also pervades American culture.

2015 ≠ 2006

Counterterrorism wasn't the only element of national security practice that Washington rediscovered and reinvigorated after 9/11; counterinsurgency also enjoyed a renaissance. As chaos erupted in Iraq in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion

and occupation of 2003, the U.S. military grudgingly starting thinking about counterinsurgency, a subject that had fallen out of favor in the national security establishment after the Vietnam War. The most successful application of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine was the 2007 “surge” in Iraq, overseen by General David Petraeus. In 2006, as violence peaked in Sunni-dominated Anbar Province, U.S. officials concluded that the United States was losing the war. In response, President George W. Bush decided to send an additional 20,000 U.S. troops to Iraq. General John Allen, then serving as deputy commander of the multinational forces in Anbar, cultivated relationships with local Sunni tribes and nurtured the so-called Sunni Awakening, in which some 40 Sunni tribes or subtribes essentially switched sides and decided to fight with the newly augmented U.S. forces against AQI. By the summer of 2008, the number of insurgent attacks had fallen by more than 80 percent.

Looking at the extent of ISIS’ recent gains in Sunni areas of Iraq, which have undone much of the progress made in the surge, some have argued that Washington should respond with a second application of the Iraq war’s counterinsurgency strategy. And the White House seems at least partly persuaded by this line of thinking: last year, Obama asked Allen to act as a special envoy for building an anti-ISIS coalition in the region. There is a certain logic to this approach, since ISIS draws support from many of the same insurgent groups that the surge and the Sunni Awakening neutralized—groups that have reemerged as threats thanks to the vacuum created by the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2011 and Maliki’s sectarian rule in Baghdad.

But vast differences exist between the situation today and the one that Washington faced in 2006, and the logic of U.S. counterinsurgency does not suit the struggle against ISIS. The United States cannot win the hearts and minds of Iraq’s Sunni Arabs, because the Maliki government has already lost

them. The Shiite-dominated Iraqi government has so badly undercut its own political legitimacy that it might be impossible to restore it. Moreover, the United States no longer occupies Iraq. Washington can send in more troops, but it cannot lend legitimacy to a government it no longer controls. ISIS is less an insurgent group fighting against an established government than one party in a conventional civil war between a breakaway territory and a weak central state.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER?

The United States has relied on counterinsurgency strategy not only to reverse Iraq's slide into state failure but also to serve as a model for how to combat the wider jihadist movement. Al Qaeda expanded by persuading Muslim militant groups all over the world to turn their more narrowly targeted nationalist campaigns into nodes in al Qaeda's global jihad—and, sometimes, to convert themselves into al Qaeda affiliates. But there was little commonality in the visions pursued by Chechen, Filipino, Indonesian, Kashmiri, Palestinian, and Uighur militants, all of whom bin Laden tried to draw into al Qaeda's tent, and al Qaeda often had trouble fully reconciling its own goals with the interests of its far-flung affiliates.

That created a vulnerability, and the United States and its allies sought to exploit it. Governments in Indonesia and the Philippines won dramatic victories against al Qaeda affiliates in their countries by combining counterterrorism operations with relationship building in local communities, instituting deradicalization programs, providing religious training in prisons, using rehabilitated former terrorist operatives as government spokespeople, and sometimes negotiating over local grievances.

Some observers have called for Washington to apply the same strategy to ISIS by attempting to expose the fault lines between the group's secular former Iraqi army officers, Sunni

tribal leaders, and Sunni resistance fighters, on the one hand, and its veteran jihadists, on the other. But it's too late for that approach to work. ISIS is now led by well-trained, capable former Iraqi military leaders who know U.S. techniques and habits because Washington helped train them. And after routing Iraqi army units and taking their U.S.-supplied equipment, ISIS is now armed with American tanks, artillery, armored Humvees, and mine-resistant vehicles.

Perhaps ISIS' harsh religious fanaticism will eventually prove too much for their secular former Baathist allies. But for now, the Saddam-era officers are far from reluctant warriors for ISIS: rather, they are leading the charge. In their hands, ISIS has developed a sophisticated light-infantry army, brandishing American weapons.

Of course, this opens up a third possible approach to ISIS, besides counterterrorism and counterinsurgency: a full-on conventional war against the group, waged with the goal of completely destroying it. Such a war would be folly. After experiencing more than a decade of continuous war, the American public simply would not support the long-term occupation and intense fighting that would be required to obliterate ISIS. The pursuit of a full-fledged military campaign would exhaust U.S. resources and offer little hope of obtaining the objective. Wars pursued at odds with political reality cannot be won.

CONTAINING THE THREAT

The sobering fact is that the United States has no good military options in its fight against ISIS. Neither counterterrorism, nor counterinsurgency, nor conventional warfare is likely to afford Washington a clear-cut victory against the group. For the time being, at least, the policy that best matches ends and means and that has the best chance of securing U.S. interests is one of offensive containment: combining a limited military campaign with a major

diplomatic and economic effort to weaken ISIS and align the interests of the many countries that are threatened by the group's advance.

ISIS is not merely an American problem. The wars in Iraq and Syria involve not only regional players but also major global actors, such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states. Washington must stop behaving as if it can fix the region's problems with military force and instead resurrect its role as a diplomatic superpower.

Of course, U.S. military force would be an important part of an offensive containment policy. Air strikes can pin ISIS down, and cutting off its supply of technology, weapons, and ammunition by choking off smuggling routes would further weaken the group. Meanwhile, the United States should continue to advise and support the Iraqi military, assist regional forces such as the Kurdish Pesh Merga, and provide humanitarian assistance to civilians fleeing ISIS' territory. Washington should also expand its assistance to neighboring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, which are struggling to contend with the massive flow of refugees from Syria. But putting more U.S. troops on the ground would be counterproductive, entangling the United States in an unwinnable war that could go on for decades. The United States cannot rebuild the Iraqi state or determine the outcome of the Syrian civil war. Frustrating as it might be to some, when it comes to military action, Washington should stick to a realistic course that recognizes the limitations of U.S. military force as a long-term solution.

The Obama administration's recently convened "summit on countering violent extremism"—which brought world leaders to Washington to discuss how to combat radical jihadism—was a valuable exercise. But although it highlighted the existing threat posed by al Qaeda's regional affiliates, it also reinforced the idea that ISIS is primarily a

counterterrorism challenge. In fact, ISIS poses a much greater risk: it seeks to challenge the current international order, and, unlike the greatly diminished core al Qaeda organization, it is coming closer to actually achieving that goal. The United States cannot single-handedly defend the region and the world from an aggressive revisionist theocratic state—nor should it. The major powers must develop a common diplomatic, economic, and military approach to ensure that this pseudo-state is tightly contained and treated as a global pariah. The good news is that no government supports ISIS; the group has managed to make itself an enemy of every state in the region—and, indeed, the world. To exploit that fact, Washington should pursue a more aggressive, top-level diplomatic agenda with major powers and regional players, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, and even China, as well as Iraq's and Syria's neighbors, to design a unified response to ISIS.

That response must go beyond making a mutual commitment to prevent the radicalization and recruitment of would-be jihadists and beyond the regional military coalition that the United States has built. The major powers and regional players must agree to stiffen the international arms embargo currently imposed on ISIS, enact more vigorous sanctions against the group, conduct joint border patrols, provide more aid for displaced persons and refugees, and strengthen UN peacekeeping missions in countries that border Iraq and Syria. Although some of these tools overlap with counterterrorism, they should be put in the service of a strategy for fighting an enemy more akin to a state actor: ISIS is not a nuclear power, but the group represents a threat to international stability equivalent to that posed by North Korea. It should be treated no less seriously.

Given that political posturing over U.S. foreign policy will only intensify as the 2016 U.S. presidential election approaches,

the White House would likely face numerous attacks on a containment approach that would satisfy neither the hawkish nor the anti-interventionist camp within the U.S. national security establishment. In the face of such criticism, the United States must stay committed to fighting ISIS over the long term in a manner that matches ends with means, calibrating and improving U.S. efforts to contain the group by moving past outmoded forms of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency while also resisting pressure to cross the threshold into full-fledged war. Over time, the successful containment of ISIS might open up better policy options. But for the foreseeable future, containment is the best policy that the United States can pursue.

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ISIS' Social Contract

What the Islamic State Offers Civilians

Mara Revkin

NOUR FOURAT / REUTERS

A man walks past a damaged mosque ain Raqqa, eastern Syria, which is controlled by ISIS, November 25, 2014.

Ahmed (not his real name) was working for an advertising agency in the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor when the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) took control in April 2014. At first, the new regime was primarily concerned with winning hearts and minds through ideological outreach and the provision of basic services. It distributed free or heavily subsidized bread, cracked down on crime, and cleaned up the streets. Initially, it asked for little in return.

After a few months, however, ISIS became increasingly demanding. In December 2014, several ISIS representatives showed up at Ahmed's office and ordered him and his coworkers to pay a percentage of their earnings as zakat, a mandatory charitable contribution that is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Even though Ahmed had already made his annual zakat contribution to less fortunate family and friends, ISIS insisted that he repay his dues (2.5 percent of his income and capital assets, as specified in the Koran) to the organization's bayt al-mal. The bayt al-mal is a sort of treasury department modeled after the financial institutions of the original seventh-century caliphate that it claims to be emulating. Ahmed felt that he had no choice but to comply, so he paid the tax in exchange for a stamped receipt. "It wasn't about the money, it was about power," he said. "They take zakat to prove that they are in control." In addition to taxes, ISIS soon began to forcibly conscript residents of Deir ez-Zor into military service, according to the Syrian human rights organization Sound and Picture.

According to the conventional wisdom, ISIS is primarily sustained by hundreds of millions of dollars in black market oil sales and a steady stream of tens of thousands of foreign recruits. But new information about tax revenues and conscription indicates that the organization is far more dependent on the cooperation of ordinary civilians than was previously believed. To be sure, ISIS still brings in oil revenue—about $2 million per week, according to some accounts. But over time, that funding source has been dwarfed by taxation. In fact, the ratio of money brought in from taxes to money from oil extraction now stands at an estimated 6:1. Meanwhile, reports of forced conscription in the Syrian cities of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, al-Hasakah, and al-Bukamal as well as the Iraqi cities of Mosul, Fallujah, and Hit indicate that voluntary recruitment is no longer sufficient to sustain ISIS's costly military campaigns. With international

recruitment on the decline, ISIS realizes that the success of its ambitious state-building project will be determined not by its appeal to foreign radicals but by its ability to cultivate homegrown support on its own turf.

So how does ISIS win the support (or at least the tax dollars) of Iraqi and Syrian civilians, who tend to be less ideologically committed to the cause of the caliphate than its foreign recruits? The answer is the same as in many states: ISIS' establishment of courts, welfare institutions, and essential services are part of an attempt to build a social contract based on reciprocal obligations in which civilians are guaranteed protection and basic rights in exchange for support to the caliphate in the form of either taxes or military service.

CONTRACTED

When ISIS captures a new area, its first priority is to win the trust and cooperation of civilians, who are an essential source of information, labor, and other material resources that are necessary for territorial expansion and state-building. In order to do so, it offers civilians a social contract that provides three main categories of benefits: justice and accountability, protection, and services. Access to these benefits is conditional on compliance with two main obligations: exclusive allegiance to ISIS and material support for governance and jihad through either tax payments or military service.

The social contract isn't just theoretical. Evidence of it can be found in so-called "documents of the city" (wathiqat al-madīnah), which appear to be inspired by a constitution-like text allegedly drafted by the Prophet himself to govern the city of Medina in the year 622. ISIS has issued documents bearing this title in the Syrian city of Raqqa, the Iraqi cities of Mosul, Tikrit, and Hit, and the Libyan city of Sirte. Ranging in

length from 13 to 16 articles, these texts explicitly enumerate the obligations of the caliphate to its “citizens”—whom ISIS calls the ri’aya—and vice versa. The following table contains key excerpts from the document issued in Raqqa in September 2014.

“Document of the City” (*Wathīqat al-Madīna*)	
Art. 1	“We [the Islamic State] bear responsibility for restoring the glories of the caliphate and obtaining retribution for the oppression and injustice suffered by … our Muslim brothers.”
Art. 2	“… We do not make accusations without evidence and proof … We show mercy to a Muslim, unless he has apostasized or given aid to criminals.”
Art. 3	“The people in the shadow of our rule are secure and safe … Islamic governance guarantees to the *ri’aya* their rights. The wronged will be given justice against a violator of his right …”
Art. 4	“We order that the funds that were under the control of the Safavid* government (public funds) must be returned to the Muslim people. These funds will be spent in the *maslaha* [interest] of the Muslims and no one is permitted to reach out his hand to loot or steal … or else be brought before the sharia judiciary … Whoever steals private property in the form of money, furniture and [other] goods from a private place without doubt will have his hand cut off, and anyone who collaborates with armed gangs who engage in brigandage will be subject to … deterrent punishments.”
Art. 5	“Trafficking and dealing alcohol or drugs, or smoking, or other taboos, are prohibited.”
Art. 6	“Mosques are the houses of God … We urge all Muslims to build them and pray …”
Art. 7	“Beware of employment with the Safavid government and the *tawaghit*** … He who repents of sin is not guilty of sin. To the apostates of the army and police and the rest of the unbelieving apparatus we say that the door of repentance is open to anyone who wants it, and we have designated specific places to receive those wishing to repent subject to conditions … For those who insist on remaining apostate, there is no alternative but death …”
Art. 8	“Councils and associations and banners [bearing the names of other groups] are unacceptable.”
Art. 9	“God commands that you join the society [the Islamic State] and renounce factions and strife … Division is one of the traps of the devil …”
Art. 10	“Our opinion regarding … polytheistic and pagan shrines is that of the Prophet [who prohibited them].”
Art. 11	“To the virtuous and dignified women: … Dress decently and in loose tunics and robes …Do not leave the house except out of necessity …”
Art. 12	“Establish Islamic governance and … release the people from the shackles of rotten positive laws …”
Art. 13	“We listen to the council of the small and the great and the free and the slave, and there is no difference among us between red and black, and we judge ourselves before others.”
Art. 14	“In conclusion we say: You have experienced a secular system and the eras of monarchy and Republicanism and Safavid rule … Now is the era of the Islamic State and the era of the Imam Abu Bakr al-Quraishi and you will see the vast difference between a secular government that saps the resources of the people and that muzzles their mouths and tramples on their rights and dignity and a Quraishi Imamate that has made the divine revelation a way of life.”

With such documents, ISIS purports to be creating a system of accountable governance that emulates the model of the original seventh-century caliphate. To be sure, external observers find it hard to believe that anyone living in fear of death by decapitation or stoning could regard such a system

as legitimate. Yet even if cooperation with ISIS is to some extent driven by such fear and coercion, it is important not to discount the relative legitimacy of ISIS governance compared to equally bad or even less desirable alternatives: a repressive dictatorship in Syria, sectarian politics in Iraq, or rule by rival armed groups such as the Free Syrian Army that have been plagued by allegationsof corruption and ineptitude. In a civil war in which all of the options available to civilians are bad, the social contract offered by ISIS needs only to be seen as marginally better than that of its competitors in order to be preferred as the lesser evil. And by some accounts, it is.

ALL RIGHT

The ISIS social contract is authoritarian and asymmetric, but it does nonetheless provide some benefits to citizens. Their political rights and freedoms are extremely limited, of course, but they are at least explicitly defined in law-like documents and legally enforceable in courts. That is, citizens whose rights—including the right to private property and the right to protection from arbitrary arrest or unlawful violence—are violated by ISIS members have the right to appeal to special "complaints" departments (known as dawawīn al-mazālim), although ISIS remains the ultimate arbiter of all grievances.

At the same time, ISIS maintains that its leaders and officials are not above the law. As one document from Raqqa states, "The Islamic State is just and there is no distinction between a soldier and a Muslim [civilian]. In the sharia courts, all are held accountable and no one has immunity, just as the Prophet would have cut off the hand of Fatima [his youngest daughter] if she had committed a theft." There are even provisions under which the caliph himself can be impeached (by the shura council) if he fails to fulfill his obligations.

The reason for such measures is that ISIS leaders recognize that the legitimacy of the caliphate depends on their ability to

police themselves, particularly the behavior of lower-ranking members. Official propaganda explicitly advises members to refrain from using violence unless they have a legal basis for doing so. An article entitled “Advice for Leaders of the Islamic State,” which was published in the group’s official magazine, states, “Beware of shedding blood unjustly … [B]y Allah, no case is reported to us involving the bloodshed of an innocent person from Ahlus-Sunnah [Sunni Muslims] that isn’t backed up by clear evidence of what he did to deserve his blood being shed.” ISIS has punished many of its own military and civilian officials for crimes that include rape, armed robbery, embezzlement of public funds, and smuggling contraband items such as cigarettes, according to interviews I have conducted with Syrians and Iraqis from ISIS-controlled areas.

Even non-Muslim adherents of other Abrahamic religions are entitled to protection and very limited freedom of worship, but only in exchange for their payment of a special tax known as the jizya and various other rules stipulated by the jizya contract, including bans on the following: construction or repair of houses of worship, possession of arms, engaging in religious rituals outside of churches, or giving sanctuary to spies or other individuals wanted by ISIS.

REUTERS

ISIS fighters burn confiscated cigarettes in the city of Raqqa, April 2, 2014.

Although Christians who consent to the terms of the jizya contract are entitled to protection and limited rights as minority subjects of the caliphate, ISIS claims that it has the legal authority to enslave or kill certain classes of non-Muslim minorities who—in the absence of conversion—are considered too deviant to be integrated into its social contract. Unlike Christians, adherents of certain non-Abrahamic faiths such as the Yazidis (which ISIS regards as “original” unbelievers as opposed to those who were initially Muslim and only later apostasized) may be enslaved or killed unless they convert to Islam.

The second key aspect of the ISIS social contract is a commitment to the protection of its citizens’ lives and property. According to Article 3 of the Raqqa document, “The people in the shadow of our rule are secure and safe.” Article 4 specifies additional protections for private property: “No one is permitted to reach out his hand to loot or steal … [and anyone who does] will be brought before the sharia judiciary

… Whoever steals private property in the form of money, furniture, or goods from a private place and is found guilty without a doubt will have his hand cut off."

The right to protection is not limited to Muslims but also extends to Christians and, in theory, to members of other protected minority (dhimmi) groups. One ISIS supporter in Mosul tweeted a photograph of an ISIS fighter purportedly guarding a church, accompanied by the caption: "A church under the protection of soldiers of the Islamic State … After [Christians] paid the jizya [tax]." ISIS' purported commitment to protecting the physical security and possessions of its citizens is particularly appealing to people living in civil war contexts, where the collapse of preexisting legal frameworks has created a fertile environment for looting, banditry, and land grabs.

> *In exchange for the benefits provided by its social contract, ISIS imposes two primary obligations on its citizens: a duty of exclusive allegiance to ISIS and a duty to provide material support to ISIS through either tax payments or military service.*

A third benefit that ISIS offers to citizens is the provision of essential services and public goods, including electricity, infrastructure, sanitation, and health care. ISIS claims that it is bound by a divine obligation to allocate resources in ways conducive to the welfare of its citizens. As Article 3 of the Raqqa document states, "Funds will be spent in the maslaha [public interest] of the Muslims." When ISIS captures new territory, it places a high priority on restoring basic services and providing humanitarian relief in order to ingratiate itself with civilians. For example, one of its first moves upon capturing the Syrian city of Palmyra was to take control of a local bread factory in order to distribute free food. Elsewhere, ISIS has opened publicly funded orphanages.Additionally,

ISIS uses property and land as incentives for recruitment and retention of new members. As one of its propaganda articles advertised to potential recruits, “Do not worry about money or accommodations for yourself and your family. There are plenty of homes and resources to cover you and your family.” One ISIS supporter expressed appreciation for these welfare measures on Twitter: “The [Islamic] State marries its youth and guarantees them housing.”

OBLIGED

In exchange for the benefits provided by its social contract, ISIS imposes two primary obligations on its citizens: a duty of exclusive allegiance to ISIS and a duty to provide material support to ISIS through either tax payments or military service. ISIS, like any insurgent group, is seeking power in a situation of competitive sovereignty, meaning a situation in which more than one actor aspires to a monopoly on legitimate violence and legal authority in the same territorial area. Accordingly, one of the first moves that ISIS made after expanding into Syria in 2013 was to establish courts that demanded exclusive jurisdiction—the authority to decide all legal disputes and cases—in areas where competing armed groups, including other Salafi-jihadists, were operating their own judiciaries. The Islamic Front and Jabhat al-Nusra attempted to negotiate a truce with ISIS, the terms of which included the establishment of a neutral Islamic court with a balanced panel of judges drawn from the different factions, but ISIS’ insistence on exclusive jurisdiction ultimately derailed the negotiations.

In addition to seeking a monopoly on legal authority, the ISIS social contract also requires the exclusive allegiance of citizens to the designated caliph. Texts describing the doctrine and statecraft ISIS emphasize the obligation of bay‘a, officially defined as “a pledge of obedience in which the pledger delegates to his leader the authority to oversee his affairs and the affairs of society.” Under ISIS’ authoritarian

social contract, there is no right to rebellion against an unjust caliph.Additionally, there can be only one caliph at a time. Indeed, concern for suppressing the dangers of factionalism is a consistent theme in ISIS' official texts. Citizens are prohibited from participating in groups or associations other than ISIS. The group's concern for securing the consent and allegiance of its subjects is apparent in photographs that depict collective bayʻa-swearing ceremonies in public squares. Whether this is a genuine display of loyalty or a staged act of propaganda, it is clear that ISIS wishes to be perceived as a legitimate authority with a popular mandate to govern.

The other main citizenship obligation imposed by the ISIS social contract is a duty to provide material support for governance and jihad, either through military service or tax payments. At first, military service was encouraged but not mandatory. ISIS propaganda makes clear that the preferred vocation for citizens is jihad, and peaceful alternatives such as farming, which supposedly "distracts from jihad," are disfavored.Propaganda advises Muslims to earn a living "by performing jihād and then taking from the agriculture of his kāfir enemies, not by dedicating his life to agriculture like his enemies do." More recently, however, reports of mandatory conscription in numerous cities in Iraq and Syria indicate that ISIS has shifted from merely encouraging military service to forcibly requiring it. In the Syrian cities of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, males above the age of 14—what ISIS considers "fighting age"—have been ordered to register their names with their local police departments. According to ISIS, its social contract authorizes mandatory conscription when the rate of voluntary enlistment is insufficient to meet the needs of the expanding caliphate.

REUTERS

An ISIS militant stands next to residents as they hold pieces of wreckage from a Syrian war plane after it crashed in Raqqa, in northeast Syria September 16, 2014.

Those who do not partake in military service must instead provide the caliphate with monetary support. ISIS requires all free Muslim citizens to pay to the group the zakat tax of 2.5 percent of income and capital assets as specified in the Koran. In a video explaining the institution of zakat, ISIS identifies eight areas of public spending for which zakat funds may be allocated, which include: those living in “absolute poverty”; proselytizing and outreach to potential converts; freeing Muslim slaves or liberating Muslim prisoners captured by non-Muslims; and supporting the mujahideen and jihad.

Although combatants appear to be exempt from zakat, they are subject to a tax of 20 percent on “spoils of war,” which may include moveable property usually referred to as ghanīma (such as slaves, weapons, antiquities) as well as immoveable property, usually referred to as fay’ (land and

residential or commercial buildings) captured by combatants in the course of military operations, or abandoned by retreating enemies. Following the Koran, the tax on these spoils goes to ISIS' public treasury.

A third type of tax collected by ISIS is khāraj, a tax that is imposed on all landowners. Since the Koran contains no references to khāraj, which was a later innovation, the taxation of land is one area of policymaking in which ISIS exercises considerable discretion. Similar taxes are imposed on retail spaces. A Syrian merchant interviewed in Turkey who still owns a store in an ISIS-controlled city explained that shopkeepers are taxed at different rates depending on the number of doors on their store—a heuristic ISIS uses to estimate the size of the business.

In its official statements, ISIS makes clear that the payment of taxes is a non-negotiable obligation. In order to promote tax compliance, ISIS disseminates instructional videos and brochures that describe the procedures for calculating taxable assets in granular detail. One video lists the exact amount owed on different quantities of livestock. For example, a person who owns between 14 and 15 camels must pay two female sheep as zakat. These tutorials reflect an attempt by ISIS to publicize and legitimize the terms of its social contract.

Those who violate the terms of the group's legally binding social contract are punished accordingly. An official textbook states that tax evasion is an unlawful act of rebellion and, by implication, a breach of the social contract: "If a group of people refuses to pay [zakat], this group will be fought the same way Abu Bakr al-Siddiq … fought those who refused to pay zakat because they are considered rebels." Elsewhere ISIS has stated that refusal to pay zakat is a form of apostasy and therefore punishable by death. Citizens who evade taxes, miss deadlines for payment, or underreport their assets are

punished with heavy fines (up to double the amount of taxes due, according to Syrians interviewed in Turkey) and sometimes prison sentences. ISIS also punishes those caught stealing or embezzling zakat funds from the public treasury. In one case in Raqqa, a man who committed such a theft was publicly whipped, forced to wear a placard describing his crime, and required to pay a fine of 500,000 Syrian liras.

In addition to the citing the necessity of taxation for financing jihad, ISIS also justifies its tax policies on redistributive and social justice grounds. “In our state, the Islamic State, there are no poor and no needy because zakat is taken from the rich and given to the poor,” said one supporter on Twitter. Another stated, “In the village of Hamima in al-Badiya [province] the Islamic State is taking zakat from the rich of the village and giving it to the poor amid the joy of the villagers over the performance of a divine obligation.” Journalistic accounts of the ISIS tax system often use the terminology of “organized crime,” “extortion,” and “racketeering,” but statements by ISIS supporters suggest that many civilians accept taxation as a legitimate requirement of their social contract.

Despite occasional reports of banditry by low-ranking members, the overall structure of ISIS’ tax system is more rational and rule-abiding than is widely assumed. ISIS has the ability and opportunity to pillage at will. Yet most of the time, it does not. Why go through the trouble and expense of creating an elaborate financial bureaucracy and issuing tax receipts when outright theft is so much easier? In the short term, looting is the most profitable strategy. But ISIS is playing a long game—the establishment of sovereignty over thousands of square miles of territory and millions of people—that requires a more restrained approach.

ISIS’ tax policies are heavily inspired by medieval Islamic economic jurisprudence, as I have argued elsewhere, but the

legal framework that ISIS has developed to legitimize its financial system has much more to do with state-building than it does with religion. A potential problem for any emerging state, whatever its ideological basis, is that in the absence of a legal framework to justify revenue-extracting policies, taxation is observationally equivalent to extortion. And so, to preempt accusations of banditry, ISIS has taken great pains to justify its tax system. As one of its official textbooks states, "Tax collectors must be honest with the leader and must not hide any of the money that they collect because it is a trusteeship." Among the duties of the leader [Imam] is the "exercise [of] effective oversight over administrators of the jizya [tax] in order to prevent them from engaging in bribery and expropriating the money of the people in a fraudulent manner."

> *Such displays of conspicuous consumption have severely undermined ISIS' claim that its self-declared caliphate offers a system of governance based on rule of law and economic justice.*

LONG GAME

When ISIS first began to capture substantial territory in Iraq and Syria, some civilians cautiously hoped that the new regime—with its promises of justice, security, and prosperity—would govern more fairly and effectively than its predecessors. To be sure, that was a low, low bar. But at least initially, ISIS's system of governance appeared to be slightly better than—or at least not significantly worse than—the available alternatives. This is why many residents of Mosul who initially fled the city when ISIS took control in June 2014 voluntarily returned to the city a few days later after hearing from friends and relatives that life under ISIS rule was better than expected.

But now, over a year later, many Syrians in Deir ez-Zor and

other ISIS-controlled areas feel that the group is as corrupt, incompetent, and repressive as the authoritarian regimes it seeks to replace. The ISIS social contract, which claims to be based on a fair exchange of benefits for fulfillment of the core obligations of citizenship in the caliphate—taxation and military service—is increasingly perceived as an uneven bargain in which the people are giving more in exchange for less.

In Deir ez-Zor, for example, ISIS is failing to provide the basic services and rights to which its citizens are supposedly entitled, according to Ahmed and other Syrians I have interviewed. Unemployment and starvation have reached unprecedented levels in the city, where a crippling siege has been preventing the delivery of food, medicine, and other vital supplies for over a year. Meanwhile, ISIS fighters—many of them foreign recruits—are receiving extravagant salaries and living lavishly in free houses expropriated from the many people who have been executed or imprisoned by ISIS on charges of violating Islamic law. While the residents of Deir ez-Zor starve, they have watched, with growing resentment and moral outrage, ISIS members enjoying Nutella and other luxury imports such as AXE body spray, a favorite with European recruits.

Such displays of conspicuous consumption have severely undermined ISIS' claim that its self-declared caliphate offers a system of governance based on rule of law and economic justice. Many civilians are losing patience. On January 5, a group calling itself the Arab Resistance in Deir ez-Zor and al-Furat issued its first public statement calling for a popular uprising to liberate Syrian lands from the "criminal gangs of Daesh." As ISIS seeks to evolve from an insurgent group into a sovereign state that is concerned not only with the production of violence and war but with capable governance and lawmaking, it will need to convince civilians that its social contract is more than just empty rhetoric. If ISIS appears to

be breaking its own rules and promises, any goodwill that it has been able to buy with bread and security will quickly evaporate. But for now, in the absence of viable alternatives, many civilians perceive the ISIS social contract as their only option.

*ISIS uses “Safavid” as a derogatory term to refer to Shiite or Iran-backed regimes such as the current governments of Iraq and Syria.

**“Tawāghīt” (plural of tāghūt) is a derogatory term used by ISIS and other Salafi-jihadist groups to denote idolatrous groups and usually refers to governments that rely on positive law (as opposed to divine law).

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How to Defeat ISIS

The Case for U.S. Ground Forces

James F. Jeffrey

ALAA AL-FAQIR / REUTERS

A Free Syrian Army fighter near Deraa, Syria January 2, 2016.

In September 2015, U.S. President Barack Obama, usually so optimistic about the future of the liberal world order, grimly described the challenges to it before the UN General Assembly: “dangerous currents risk pulling us back into a darker, more disordered world.” The threat of the Islamic State (also called ISIS) is only one of those currents, but it is certainly the most immediately threatening, a pseudo-state with an army, access to funding, an appealing religion-based ideology, and the capability to launch, or inspire, mass terrorist attacks anywhere. It is bankrupting those regional

states that are trying to cope with it and providing the excuse for a destabilizing Russian regional intervention and a budding axis with Damascus and Tehran.

U.S. officials beginning with Obama have repeatedly stressed that the U.S. mission is not to contain ISIS but to “defeat” and “destroy” it. U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter has twice stated that we are “at war” with ISIS. And given the group’s potential for mayhem, this policy is wise. Yet 18 months after the first U.S. troops were ordered to Iraq to counter ISIS, the group has neither been defeated nor, according recently to Carter and JCS Chairman Joseph Dunford, even contained.

More remarkable is that the United States arguably has the means to destroy the group through its current policy of air support, train-and-equip programs to build up local allies, and special forces strikes—but only if they are augmented with at least some U.S. ground forces. Yet the administration has dug in on its refusal to send ground troops to the conflict, even as it begrudgingly taps other types of military power, including special forces advisors closer to the front, high-end special forces raiding teams, Apache attack helicopters, AC-130 gunships aimed at the ISIS oil truck fleet. In his December 6 address to the nation, Obama gave this reason for the ground forces ban: using them would result in a “long and costly ground war.” He continued that “If we occupy foreign lands,” ISIS, “can maintain insurgencies for years, killing thousands of our troops, draining our resources.” In that, he was evoking President George W. Bush’s Iraq war as a warning—a rather compelling one for most Americans, who do not want another such war.

RODI SAID / REUTERS

A U.S.-backed alliance of Syrian Kurds and Arab rebel groups, supported by U.S. coalition planes, captured Tishrin dam, south of Kobani, Syria December 26, 2015.

For those of us who have worked with Obama, his argument comes as no surprise. His skepticism toward military action is manifest in his emphasis on ending America's wars and his unwillingness in 2013 to act militarily against Syrian chemical weapons use. He best summed up his view in an address to West Point cadets in 2014: "Since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes came not from our restraint, but from our willingness to rush into military adventures—without thinking through the consequences." The choice is thus presented as a stark one: Obama's military force with an ultra-light touch, essentially the anti-al Qaeda campaign of bombing, rare ground raids, and support for local forces (so far, with just limited successes, such as in Ramadi) or a return to Bush's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

If this choice—Obama or Bush—reflects reality, the appropriate decision under normal circumstances would be to

opt in with Obama and hope that his indirect and half measures might, in the “long term,” as the administration stresses, take out ISIS. But given that the “dangerous currents” that even the president acknowledges are increasingly strong, times are not normal, at least as we defined the word after the Cold War. In that immediate happy period, we faced no existential threat, our military was unchallenged, the broad architecture of global security was stable despite local threats, and, most importantly, all our military engagements from Bosnia to Northern Iraq were so-called wars of choice. As such, they had to be justified not only by ending violence or pushing back aggression, but by social and political goals as well. Michael Mazarr wrote a definitive account of this process in Foreign Affairs two years ago.

> *For those of us who have worked with Obama, his argument comes as no surprise.*

The apogee of this armed amelioration was Bush’s post-9/11 interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. He made it abundantly clear to those engaged in the two conflicts that his ultimate justification was not just regime change but societal transformation, even if that required a massive counterinsurgency campaign against the insurgents who didn’t buy made-in-Washington social engineering.
Obama argues that if the United States further escalated its operations against ISIS, in particular by committing ground troops, the country would once more be heading in the same direction. But his arguments distort the recommendations about use of troops, and confuse the use of American power meant to take down a threatening opponent with operations to deal with the consequences of that defeat.

First, most suggestions about U.S. ground troops do not advocate large numbers, but rather an elite force to deal with

the particular military situation the United States faces with ISIS. Just as the forces now defending against ISIS are all regional, so would the majority of those on the attack be from the region. But to accomplish the president's mission to defeat ISIS, ground forces must take its territory and smash its organized forces. The reasons why a huge force of local ground troops allied with the United States in Iraq and Syria has had only limited success in such offensive operations include incompatibility of political objectives; low morale; inadequate leadership, weapons, and skill sets; and an inability to take on dug-in, well-armed, and experienced ISIS fighters willing to die without taking on significant casualties.

This is why many commentators, including retired General Jack Keane, advocate a limited U.S. ground force of several brigades (each of 5,000 combat troops plus logistical support) on standby to provide a rapid, elite reserve ready to reinforce any offensive or to spearhead it if it bogs down. Its mission would not be to take over from local and regional forces, but rather, to augment them. Such U.S. forces, as in numerous other conflicts, would serve as rallying anchors for contributions by NATO forces and some of the better local formations. U.S. units, NATO formations, and high-level local forces have skills in rapid decisive combined arms (infantry-armor-artillery-engineer-air) offensive operations that most of the established regional forces and local militias the United States now relies on could only dream of. Although ISIS has 20,000–30,000 fighters according to most estimates, they are scattered around a Texas-sized perimeter holding against hundreds of thousands of troops surrounding them. Given the generally open terrain, total U.S. and coalition control of the air, and the distances involved, the various scattered detachments cannot rapidly reinforce each other.

Thus several U.S. brigades of 5,000 troops reinforced with other first class NATO forces and equal numbers of the best trained local forces, would likely have near numerical

superiority, and massive firepower, airpower, mobility, and logistics superiority, over the ISIS detachments that they would face. Even Obama agreed in a November press conference in Turkey, that the United States could take down ISIS rapidly with U.S. ground forces. He was echoed by Secretary Carter in a Senate testimony the next month.

The administration's putting U.S. ground forces on the table would have two other positive effects on the anti-ISIS campaign. First, it would end a logical absurdity: The United States asserts that the counter-ISIS fight is its own war, yet it demands that other, far less capable, forces suffer heavy casualties attacking ISIS while it risks not a single soldier beyond a few special forces. That's not what the country did in Korea, Kuwait, or Kosovo, and such an approach is not likely to attract enough quality forces willing to fight under our direction.

Second, the administration's stressing repeatedly what the United States is not going to do (especially when polls indicate that most Americans want to see more aggressive U.S. action), signals to friends and opponents that the president is not serious about defeating ISIS. Limiting the means in any specific military engagement gives the impression that avoiding costs or commitments, rather than the mission one set out to accomplish, is the highest priority. In that way, the limitation is allowed to dictate the outcome.

To justify the no-ground-troops policy, the president conjures up the Bush administration's nation-building experiences, which did involve the deaths of thousands of troops and years of insurgency. But this argument has two flaws. The first: If Obama is serious about destroying ISIS, with or without U.S. ground troops involved, he will be faced with a major "day-after" problem once the group is driven underground. That is exactly what happened after, without ground troops, the United States forced the Soviets out of Afghanistan and

destroyed the Qaddafi regime. In short, the “nation-building” argument is only logical if the president really does not intend to do anything more than contain and degrade ISIS.

Second, it is anything but inevitable that the “day-after” problem must be solved with U.S. forces. Although U.S. troops bring unique offensive capabilities to any fight, the first priority in any day-after scenario—holding terrain—can be done with local ground forces, backed by U.S. airpower, logistics, and advisors. As we see today, a heterogeneous mix of first- to third-rate Iraqi army units, assorted militias, local police, Sunni tribes, and various flavors of Kurdish fighters with their U.S. support, are holding ground against ISIS when it can field an army of 20,000–30,000; similar arrangements surely could work against its remnants.

> *Once Washington treats “defeating ISIS” and “the aftermath” as two separate, albeit linked, operations, then the cost and benefits of using U.S. ground troops to defeat ISIS can be soberly assessed.*

A counter to this argument is to raise the “Pottery Barn” principle associated with Colin Powell: “if you break, it you own it.” This idea gained currency in the debate prior to the invasion of Iraq; if the United States decides on a war of choice, when other options were available, and in the process, destroys a state that was providing at least basic services to millions, the argument went, then the United States has practical and moral obligations to stay on to fix what it broke. But this line of thinking simply does not apply in the case of ISIS. The fight against ISIS is not a war of choice, but one of necessity. Destroying the so-called state—although it would create a governance vacuum in areas where ISIS currently rules—would not create any moral obligation for the United States to stay on as an occupying force.
A day-after scenario involves much more than just securing

terrain. It also involves providing immediate relief supplies and medical care to large populations, rapidly setting up local governance, and integrating liberated areas into larger political structures including the Baghdad government in Iraq and whatever emerges from the international peace negotiations in Syria. That all has to be sealed by aggressive diplomacy to win over—or at least neutralize—regional spoiler states and engage the International community, international organizations, and NGOs. The United States, the European Union, and the United Nations all have much experience doing this elsewhere in the Middle East and in the Balkans. There is no need for the United States to play the primary role in this longer-term effort, particularly with a troop presence, unless it is seeking a transformation, along the lines of the goal in Iraq 2003–11, of those areas of Iraq and Syria where ISIS had previously ruled. But a United States wiser from its Iraq experiences would presumably not attempt yet another democratic transformation of a Middle Eastern society in the middle of violence (which was the real reason the country stayed on there).

AHMED SAAD / REUTERS

A car drives past over suspension bridge in the Green Zone in Baghdad, October 5, 2015. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared the heavily fortified Green Zone in central Baghdad open to all citizens on Sunday.

Once Washington treats “defeating ISIS” and “the aftermath” as two separate, albeit linked, operations, then the cost and benefits of using U.S. ground troops to defeat ISIS can be soberly assessed. Given the costs, inevitable casualties and unknowns when troops are committed, there is always a downside risk that things will go wrong, and perhaps in a happier period where no security issue is truly important the United States could afford to live with ISIS and avoid a risky commitment. But the world is now in another era, one the United States can alas remember. Obama, in his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize speech, summed it up beautifully: “It was not simply international institutions…that brought stability to a post-World War II world. Whatever mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms.”

He wasn’t referring just to drones, ordinance launches from 15,000 feet, or 12-man special forces teams.

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Obama's Way

The President in Practice

Fred Kaplan

POOL / GETTY IMAGES

The Decider: Obama and other officials in New York, September 2014.

On January 28, 2009, barely a week into his presidency, Barack Obama met with the U.S. military's top generals and admirals on their own turf, inside "the tank," the Joint Chiefs of Staff's conference room on the second floor of the Pentagon. A senior official recalled the new president as "remarkably confident—composed, relaxed, but also deferential, not trying to act too much the commander in chief." Obama walked around the room, introducing himself to everyone; he thanked them and the entire armed forces for their service and sacrifice; then he sat down for a

freewheeling discussion of the world's challenges, region by region, crisis by crisis. He was "the man in full," the official said, fluent on every issue, but more than that—a surprise to the officers, who had been leery of this young, inexperienced Democrat—he displayed a deep streak of realism.

At one point, Obama remarked that he was not the sort of person who drives down a street wishing he could park wherever he likes. If he saw an open spot, even one that required some tricky parallel parking, he would be fine with squeezing into it. Obama's meaning was clear: he had been dealt a bad hand (two unpopular wars, alienated allies, the deepest recession in decades), but he would find a way to deal with the world as it was.

Seven years later, many officers and defense officials, including some who were so impressed with Obama at the start, look back at his presidency as following a different style of governing. They laud the historic accomplishments—the Iran nuclear deal, the opening to Cuba, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the prevention (so far) of another terrorist attack on American soil—and they acknowledge that he has often tried to make the best of bad choices. But too often, they say, he has avoided taking action, waiting for conditions to get better—circling the block and, in his own metaphor, waiting for a better parking spot to open up.

This is a common critique of Obama's foreign policy: that he evades hard decisions, that he is allergic to military force if it risks American casualties or escalation, that there is often a mismatch between his words and his deeds. "This is a pattern," one retired four-star general said. "He issues stern warnings, then does nothing. It damages American credibility."

Is the charge true? And to the extent that it has some validity, how much can be laid at Obama's feet, and how much should

be attributed to the intractability of the problems he has faced? Would a different sort of president have handled the decade's challenges better, and if so, how?

The following examination of key crises and decisions is based on conversations I have had with dozens of officials across the span of Obama's presidency and with 20 mid- to senior-level officials (past and present, almost all on a background basis) interviewed specifically for this article.

THE LESSON OF LIBYA

In December 2009, Obama journeyed to Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. The award was premature, to say the least, but he used his acceptance speech to lay down the principles of a foreign policy he hoped to follow—a sophisticated grappling with the tensions between idealism and realism. It was a daring speech for a Peace Prize recipient. "To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism," he said. "It is a recognition of history, the imperfection of man, and the limits of reason." Nations must "adhere to standards that govern the use of force," and a just, lasting peace must be "based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual." Still, "America cannot act alone," except on matters of vital national interest, and mere lofty rhetoric about human rights only sustains "a crippling status quo." Engagement with repressive regimes may lack "the satisfying purity of indignation," but "no repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door."

Benjamin Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, said, "When people ask me to summarize [Obama's] foreign policy, I tell them to take a close look at that speech." Another former top White House official called it "a template to how he approaches problems," a "framework for how he thinks about U.S. power." Whether

he followed the template—how he grappled in action with the tensions he recognized in theory—would be, by his own standard, the measure of his presidency.

The early years of Obama's term were taken up with challenges inherited from the Bush administration, especially the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. At the start of 2011, however, a string of new problems emerged, as domestic protests against authoritarian leaders broke out across the Middle East. The Ben Ali regime in Tunisia fell in January, and the Mubarak regime in Egypt followed in early February. By late February, rebels opposed to the Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi had seized control in cities such as Benghazi, and the dictator's days seemed numbered. But then the tide of war reversed, and Qaddafi's forces moved to crush the uprising.

JASON REED / REUTERS

Obama at the Nobel Peace Prize award ceremony in Oslo, December 2009.

With tens of thousands of civilian lives at risk, the Obama administration, which had come out in support of the rebels, faced a difficult choice. The members of the Arab League were unanimously imploring the United States to get involved. NATO allies were keen to intervene in support of the armed rebels, and a UN Security Council resolution was in the works. At a National Security Council meeting called to discuss the crisis, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice, and some of Obama's NSC staff argued for action, citing moral imperatives and the prospect of a truly multilateral force. But according to several people present at the meeting, Pentagon officials opposed intervening, pointing out that the United States had no vital interests in Libya and that any serious commitment would get Washington bogged down, possibly for years.

Two options were set before the president: go in all the way as the leader of an alliance, or don't go in at all. Obama's response was to come up with a third way, which emerged as he thought through the problem out loud. Early on, he articulated the principles that would underlie whatever course he chose: no U.S. boots on the ground, no military action at all unless it had a legal basis and a decent chance of succeeding, and, finally, an appropriate division of labor with allies—the U.S. military would provide its unique capabilities (among them precision bombing and intelligence sharing), but U.S. allies, who had a far greater interest in the conflict's outcome, would assume the brunt of protecting Libyan civilians and restoring order after the fighting.

In an interview at the time with The New Yorker, an Obama adviser (whose identity remains unknown) dubbed this approach "leading from behind," a term that would come in for much derision. But in context, it made sense, and it fit Obama's outlook on the role and limits of military force, the distinction between interests and vital interests, and the need to align the instruments of power with the intensity of those

interests.

The first phase of the resulting operation was ultimately a success. The combination of U.S. air strikes and intelligence, NATO air support, and rebel movements on the ground led to the defeat of Qaddafi's forces and (although this was not an explicit aim of the campaign) the killing of the Libyan leader himself. But the second phase was a failure: a new government was never fully formed, the rebel factions' squabbles degenerated into civil war, and the country's social order (such as it was) collapsed.

The problem was that the NATO allies that had promised to lead the stabilization phase of a post-Qaddafi Libya did not follow through, in part because this phase turned out to be much more violent than they had anticipated. Restoring (or, really, creating) order would have required armed intervention—and possibly serious combat—on the ground, a mission for which European states had little capacity and less appetite.

Obama recognized the failure, acknowledging in his September 2015 speech to the UN General Assembly, "Even as we helped the Libyan people bring an end to the reign of a tyrant, our coalition could have and should have done more to fill a vacuum left behind." And the lesson weighed on him when considering how to handle a similar crisis in Syria.

Zohra Bensemra / REUTERS
Libyan rebels at the airport in Misrata, May 2011.

THE SYRIAN SINKHOLE

As the Arab Spring evolved, demonstrations broke out in Damascus against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Assad struck back with extreme force, killing protesters first by the hundreds, then by the thousands. Gradually, a rebel force arose, and the country plunged into civil war. With the United States having already intervened in Libya under similar circumstances, the question naturally arose whether it would intervene in Syria as well.

In an NSC meeting, Obama spelled out the differences between the two conflicts. Libya's fighting had taken place on an open desert, which allowed for clear targeting; Syria was enmeshed in urban warfare, with civilians, rebels, and soldiers intermingled. The Libyan rebels had had a chance at forming a cohesive government; there were no such possibilities in Syria. No other outside power was calling on the United States to intervene this time around. Finally, the conflict was cascading into a proxy war for the regionwide Sunni-Shiite confrontation. Not only did the United States have little at stake in this fight, but it also had little ability to

influence its direction or outcome. According to several attendees of the meeting, nobody really disagreed with these points.

And yet the administration had aligned itself with the season's popular uprisings. In May, in a speech of uncharacteristic exuberance, Obama likened the turmoil to previous eras of democratic revolution. He spoke with particular urgency about Syria, proclaiming that Assad "must" stop shooting his own people and allow human rights monitors to enter the country. In August, Obama joined with the leaders of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in calling on Assad to step down. Syria's ruler was "on the wrong side of history," Obama said, declaring that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside."

> *For the most part, Obama has stayed true to the template of his Nobel address, keeping sight of the big picture as others have gotten lost in the shrubs.*

Such rhetoric was driven by two factors. First, the aides in Obama's inner circle—few of whom knew anything about Middle Eastern politics—really did think Assad's regime was nearing collapse. Second, given that apparent fact, they felt it was best to put the administration publicly on "the right side of history," especially since allied nations were calling on Obama to show "leadership."

The rhetoric was not entirely empty. Obama did ask his military and intelligence chiefs to come up with plans to speed history along, and in the summer of 2012, CIA Director David Petraeus laid out a scheme to arm a group of "moderate" Syrian rebels. The plan, which Petraeus had formulated with Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan and a few other Arab security chiefs, called for shipping small arms, mainly rifles, to a small, select group of the Syrian opposition.

Petraeus did not promise the moon; he explicitly said that these rebels could not oust Assad right away and that the goal was to put “pressure” on Assad. If you’re saying Assad must go, he was telling the president, here’s how the CIA can help. The plan had the backing of Clinton, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But the president rejected it.

GORAN TOMASEVIC / REUTERS

A Free Syrian Army fighter in Aleppo, August 2012.

Obama was not opposed to taking action; he had asked Petraeus and Panetta for options. But he was opposed to doing something merely for the sake of doing something, and the Petraeus plan seemed to fall into that category. Who were these rebels, he asked? Could the United States really distinguish the good ones from the bad ones? (Petraeus insisted that he could, but Obama was unconvinced.) If these rebels did emerge as a threat to the regime, would Iran, which had invested heavily in Assad, simply stand by, or

would it intervene (as Obama thought more likely)?

In NSC meetings, several attendees recall, Petraeus acknowledged that it might take years for the rebels to mount an effective challenge to Assad's rule. Meanwhile, the CIA's plan might throw Assad psychologically and give Washington "skin in the game," a path to influence over the long haul. This was not a winning argument with Obama: he was looking for something that had a chance of succeeding in the near term, and he did not want skin in a game played in the quagmire of a sectarian civil war. While Petraeus was working up the plan, Obama asked the CIA to produce a paper on how often in the past U.S. arms had succeeded in helping rebels oust hostile governments. The answer: not very often. That sealed the case.

Although grounded in logic and history, the rejection of intervention in Syria set off the first waves of discontent over Obama's foreign policy in general—the notion that he did not want to use force, that he was always on the lookout for arguments that rationalized this disinclination, that he talked bold but failed to follow through, which made all his commitments ring hollow.

Later on, as the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS) took control of vast swaths of Iraq and Syria, Obama's critics argued that if only the president had accepted Petraeus' plan, ISIS might not have found a foothold. But the claim seems far-fetched—even though a few of Obama's close advisers allow, in retrospect, that it might have been worth giving Petraeus' option a chance. In any case, two years later, Obama approved a similar plan. However, when the American-backed rebels started racking up victories on the battlefield and appeared to be closing in on Assad, Obama's prediction of what would happen next came true: the Iranians redoubled their support for Assad, sending Quds Force soldiers to fight the rebels. And Russian President Vladimir

Putin, fearing the loss of Moscow's sole outpost outside the former Soviet Union, sent tanks, planes, and missiles to support the Syrian army.

REDLINE, RED FACE

Syria is where Obama's foreign policy met its most brutal challenge, and where his tools for dealing with crises—words, logic, persistent questions, and sequential problem solving—proved inadequate.

At least five times in the eight-month span between August 2012 and April 2013, Obama or administration officials publicly warned Assad that using chemical weapons against rebels and protesters would cross a "redline." It would mark "a game changer from our perspective," Obama elaborated on one occasion. "There would be enormous consequences," he said on another. It would be "totally unacceptable," and Assad would be "held accountable." Yet despite such utterances, say close aides and officials, the president never ordered up a plan for what to do if Assad crossed the line.

Then, on August 21, 2013, rocket shells containing sarin gas slammed rebel-controlled areas in the Damascus suburbs, killing an estimated 1,500 people. The redline had been crossed. Obama swiftly decided to retaliate. Attack plans were drawn up, most of them designed to destroy not the chemical stockpiles themselves (explosions of which might spread the gas far and wide) but rather the munitions and facilities required to launch them into battle. Assad's regime was not the explicit target in any of these plans, but some White House aides thought, or hoped, that his strength might erode as a side effect.

PETE SOUZA / WHITE HOUSE / HANDOUT VIA REUTERS

Obama meets with national security staff to discuss the situation in Syria in the White House Situation Room, August 2013.

Obama seemed to be serious about launching the strikes. His aides were instructed to phone legislators and journalists to make sure they had read an unclassified intelligence report that the White House had just released proving that Assad was behind the chemical attacks. A UN resolution backing the use of force in Syria was unlikely; Russia and possibly China would veto it. So Obama rallied Arab and NATO nations to join in the attack, or at least to endorse it. He got no such support, except from France and the United Kingdom—but then British Prime Minister David Cameron requested authorization for an attack from Parliament, which voted it down.

On August 31, the NSC met for more than two hours. Everyone around the table agreed that the United Kingdom's backpedaling, although regrettable, should not affect the

president’s decision and that he should proceed with the air strikes. A team of lawyers advised him that he had the legal authority to do so. After the meeting, however, Obama famously took a walk on the White House back lawn with his chief of staff, Denis McDonough, and when he came back to the Situation Room, he announced that he had decided to let Congress vote on the question.

All of the president’s aides and officials were surprised, and not in a good way. But Obama explained that he needed some institutional backing for such a drastic, risky move. A bombing campaign might kill nearby civilians, and it might have no impact on Assad. What if Assad doubled down and launched more attacks, chemical or otherwise? If the United States answered with still more air strikes, it would risk getting sucked into a civil war, and if it did nothing, that would be worse still: Washington would look weaker, and Assad would emerge stronger, than if the United States had done nothing to begin with. Some White House aides had viewed air strikes as a one-off proposition, but Pentagon officials had argued during the NSC meetings that if Obama went ahead with air strikes (which they supported), he should be prepared for escalation. Obama suspected the Pentagon was right. Whatever he did, his actions (or inaction) would sire criticism and disunity; they would receive little support and could not be sustained.

To many around the table, each separate piece of Obama’s argument made sense, but the overall logic did not. Maybe it was a bad idea to proceed with air strikes, but in that case, Obama should not have drawn those redlines: he should not have recited the rationale for air strikes to so many diplomats, journalists, and legislators; he should not have told Secretary of State John Kerry to make a case for the bombings (in a powerful speech just hours before he changed course); and after making this new decision, he certainly should not have gone ahead with a scheduled prime-time television address in

which he detailed Assad's perfidy, laid out the national security concerns, claimed he had the legal authority to respond with unilateral air strikes—and then announced that he was sending the matter to Congress.

> *At times, Obama has talked more boldly than he has acted, creating a needless gap between words and deeds.*

One NSC official who was relieved that the strikes did not take place nevertheless said, "We paid a price for pulling back. The perception among people in the region was that they couldn't rely on Obama to pull the trigger." A former top White House official said, "When people—serious people—say Obama is indecisive and uncertain, they're talking about this episode with Syria."

The White House lobbied Congress to pass a resolution authorizing the use of force, but the task was clearly futile: most Republicans did not want to do any favors for Obama, and many Democrats were leery of military action. In the end, Russia came to the rescue. At a press conference on September 9, Kerry was asked if Assad could do anything to avoid air strikes. Kerry replied, "Sure, he could turn over every bit of his [chemical] weapons to the international community within the next week, without delay," adding, "but he isn't about to." To everyone's astonishment, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov replied that he could make that happen—and he did. Under Russian pressure, Assad surrendered very nearly all of his chemical weapons for destruction.

Obama and his aides declared victory, noting that this diplomatic solution was more effective than military strikes would have been and that the threat of those strikes was what had driven Russia to pressure Assad. The first claim was

probably true; the second probably was not. The fact is Congress seemed certain to defeat Obama's motion before Russia stepped in. It is possible that Putin never believed that Obama would feel bound by Congress, that he would find some way to launch the strikes anyway. But more pertinent, Russian leaders have always taken pains to keep weapons of mass destruction—biological, chemical, or nuclear—out of their allies' hands: not so much because they abhor those weapons as because they abhor the loss of control. Moscow had its own interests in stripping the loose cannon Assad of these ghastly weapons, and since the redline crisis had forced Obama to focus on the chemicals and not on Assad's regime, the diplomatic save would serve one of Russia's vital interests—the preservation of Moscow's only foothold in the Middle East.

THE ISIS CRISIS

The redline fiasco was a low point in the administration's foreign policy, but the troubles in Syria were hardly over. Less than a year after the chemical weapons settlement, ISIS—which Obama had recently dismissed as a "JV" version of al Qaeda—stormed Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq. The U.S.-trained Iraqi soldiers fled at first contact, and the armed jihadists barreled on to Ramadi and Fallujah and, for a while, came perilously close to Baghdad.

The jihadists had started out and were largely based in Syria, but Obama focused his anti-ISIS strategy on Iraq because that's where it might have some effect; the United States, after all, had resources, air bases, and a partnership of sorts with a functioning government in the country—and it had none of those things in Syria, where Obama remained properly wary of diving into a sectarian civil war. Even by September 2014, when Obama realized that Syria couldn't be ignored (it was, after all, the headquarters of ISIS' operations, and he knew very well that the Iraqi-Syrian border was

porous to the point of meaningless), he stuck to what his aides called an “Iraq first” strategy. American air strikes, which had long begun against ISIS forces in Iraq, would be extended to Syria, but only over the paths that ISIS used to travel between the two countries. Obama also announced a program to train and equip “moderate” Syrian rebels on bases in Saudi Arabia but noted that they wouldn’t be ready to fight ISIS for many months; clearly, Syria was on the back burner, at best.

Days after Obama’s announcement, ISIS laid siege to Kobani, a mainly Kurdish town on the Syrian-Turkish border. The town had no strategic significance, but a massacre was in the making. More than that, ISIS was sending thousands of jihadists into the town—forming an easy concentrated target, which neither the Pentagon nor Obama could resist. Obama ordered massive air strikes, which killed an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 ISIS fighters.

OSMAN ORSAL / REUTERS

An explosion caused by an air strike in Kobani, Syria, November 2014.

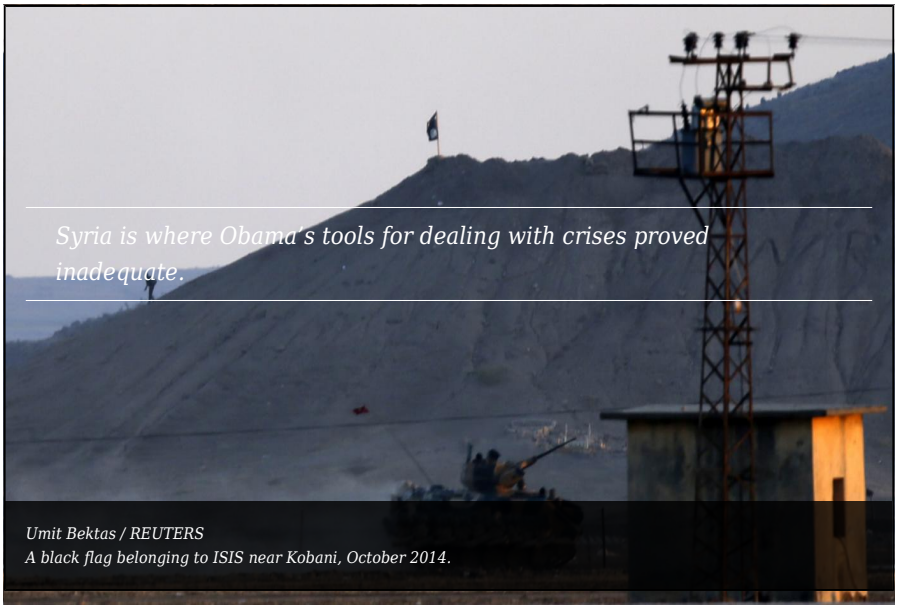
In another unexpected feature of the battle, Kurdish fighters gathered to stave off ISIS, fought very capably, and recaptured the town. Obama had not been opposed to going after ISIS inside Syria; he just had not seen a suitable partner that could carry out the fight on the ground. In the Syrian Kurds, he found one, and U.S. air strikes continued, often in tandem with Kurdish ground assaults. At the same time, the CIA started covertly assisting a group of rebels in southern Syria whose main aim was to overthrow Assad. Again, Obama had opposed Petraeus' plan to arm some rebels not because he was against arming rebels but because he did not see how that particular plan or those particular rebels would succeed. The new plan seemed more plausible, in part because the CIA and the U.S. military had gathered a lot more intelligence and scoped out reliable forces over the previous year. (A separate $500 million Pentagon program to train and equip a small group of northern Syrian rebels to fight ISIS proved publicly disastrous: the rebels turned out to be more interested in fighting Assad's army than ISIS, taking them out of the fight to train in Saudi Arabia only disoriented them, and more militant rebels killed almost all of them on their reentry into Syria.)

Viewed piece by piece, tactical move by tactical move, Obama's operations appeared to be making progress. But foreign fighters kept flooding the region, ISIS was barely budged aside, and although Assad's army seemed imperiled, it was still quite large (at around 125,000 troops) and recovered much of its strength after Russia sent in tanks and jet fighters in September 2015. Russia's move raised the hackles of some of Obama's critics, who saw Putin as trying to revive the Soviet empire. Obama didn't bite, and wisely so. At an NSC meeting, he cautioned against viewing Russia's intervention through a Cold War prism. We are not at war with Russia over Syria, he said, according to officials who were at the meeting. Putin's vital interest in this had much to

do with his own domestic politics, and an alarmed American response would have played into his game. Finally, Obama doubted that the Russian military campaign would have much impact on the battle.

Nonetheless, Obama was still receptive to attractive options for his own military posture. The Syrian Kurds were racking up more successes (and requiring more protection from Turkey, which was pounding them with air strikes while claiming to be going after ISIS), and so Obama approved plans to send the Kurds more ammunition—and to deploy U.S. Special Forces to join them in raids on ISIS strongholds, secret missions that resulted in six fatalities before Obama announced the actions publicly.

Obama has a keen legal mind, which serves him and the country well when he pokes holes in specious arguments for risky policies. But it also enables him to rationalize his own porous positions: for instance, that conducting joint raids falls in the category of “advise and assist,” not “boots on the ground.” He can also make firm assurances that he will not push these ground forces any further, ignoring that he has laid the groundwork and set the logic for his successor in the White House to escalate the fight, if he or she is so inclined. (Not to draw precise parallels, but in a similar vein, President John F. Kennedy firmly resisted pressure from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to deploy “combat troops” to Vietnam yet expanded the scope and numbers of “advisers” there, leaving President Lyndon Johnson to believe he was following in his predecessor’s footsteps when he poured 500,000 U.S. troops into the fight.)



Umit Bektas / REUTERS
A black flag belonging to ISIS near Kobani, October 2014.

THE SEARCH FOR ORDER

What has been missing in Obama's Syria policy, in all its phases, is a coherent strategy. His two aims—defeating ISIS and pressuring Assad to step down—are in some ways contradictory. Assad's continued reign has been a magnet for foreign Sunni fighters to join ISIS. But in the short run, Assad's army, if properly directed, could be the most potent anti-ISIS force—second perhaps only to Iran, which has been sending members of its elite Quds Force to protect Assad's regime. Obama has been constrained from forming an overt alliance with Assad or Iran, in part because he has needed Sunni allies—Egypt, Turkey, and the Gulf states—to delegitimize and defeat the Sunni radicals of ISIS; if he bonded with Shiite Iran or its client Assad, those countries might drop out of the coalition.

Therein lies the heart of the problem not only with Obama's strategy against ISIS but with any U.S. president's stab at such a strategy. If all the countries that feared and loathed ISIS—which is to say, almost all the countries in the region—joined forces, ISIS would crumble in short order. But

each of those countries has more fear and loathing for at least one of its potential allies (Turkey for the Kurds and Saudi Arabia for Iran, for example). Forming an effective coalition has therefore been all but impossible—a fact that ISIS commanders have shrewdly exploited.

As many of Obama's critics contend, a coherent regional strategy—not just a series of piecemeal responses to crises—is needed to solve this problem. But what is this regional strategy? Who should lead it? What incentives might lure the potential coalition's players to subordinate their individual interests to the larger goal? (In October, Obama dropped his reluctance and invited Iran and Russia to join talks in Vienna to discuss a political solution to the Syrian crisis and a joint fight against ISIS. The prospects seemed dim, until—on the very eve of the conference—ISIS agents mounted coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris. Although the odds remain long, a plausible path to a settlement opened up. Obama seems to have recognized, along with others, that transcending the sectarian divide rather than accommodating it—and forming alliances with rivals against larger, common threats—is the only way toward a peaceful transition.)

These complexities are symptomatic of a larger phenomenon that accounts for the surge of violence throughout the Middle East: the breakdown of the colonial order imposed at the end of World War I. This order, with its artificial borders designed to split or suppress tribal identities, would have collapsed after World War II (along with the British and French colonies) but for the deep freeze imposed by the Cold War. When the Soviet Union imploded, the Cold War too dissolved, along with the international security system that it had created and sustained for nearly half a century. With the subsequent diffusion of global power and fragmentation of power blocs, the collapse of the Middle East's borders and authorities resumed—a process accelerated by President George W. Bush's 2003 invasion of Iraq, which disrupted the

balance of power among nations, sects, and tribes that had kept an uneasy peace between Shiites and Sunnis, not only within Iraq but across the region, as the disruption's ripples spread.

Some of Obama's critics claim that if he had found a way to keep 10,000 American troops in Iraq instead of going through with a complete withdrawal in 2011, the renewal of sectarian violence and the rise of ISIS to fill the subsequent power vacuum would never have happened. But this is extremely unlikely, given that in an earlier era it took close to 170,000 U.S. combat troops using extraordinary measures to stem a similar tide, and even then they were able to do so only temporarily. In any case, Obama had no choice in the matter. The status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) that Bush signed in 2008 demanded, "All the United States Forces shall withdraw from all Iraqi territory no later than December 31, 2011." Obama was, in fact, amenable to keeping 5,000 troops in Iraq for the long haul and sent emissaries to Baghdad to see if an extension could be negotiated, but revisions to the SOFA including a U.S. demand that American troops enjoy immunity from Iraqi law, required parliamentary approval, and no factions in the Iraqi parliament, except perhaps the Kurds, would vote for the Americans to stay. (Obama has been able to send military forces back to Iraq only because the SOFA expired after three years.)

As for Afghanistan, the other war that Obama promised and tried to end, it keeps raging as well. In October 2015, reversing an earlier policy to withdraw all U.S. troops from the country by the end of his term, Obama announced that 5,500 would remain there to continue training and equipping Afghan forces and to conduct counterterrorist operations.

BAZ RATNER / REUTERS
U.S. soldiers fire a howitzer artillery piece in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, June 2011.

Obama announced this change soon after Taliban fighters took over the northern city of Kunduz, but he had made the decision a few months earlier, according to a senior counterterrorism official. The new Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, had asked Obama not to withdraw all U.S. troops, signed a bilateral security agreement giving U.S. forces legal protections (an accord that his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, had refused to consider), and promised reforms to broaden inclusivity and crack down on corruption. Meanwhile, terrorist groups still flourished across the border with Pakistan. No one in the NSC opposed sustaining a counterterrorist force on some base in the region; here was Ghani offering three existing bases. An interagency study conducted by General Martin Dempsey, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, concluded that the mission could be supported with 5,500 troops. And so the decision was made. Kunduz (which Afghan soldiers quickly recaptured) was the news peg that preempted political objections.

The tragedy of Obama's presidency is that, from the beginning, he has wanted to shift away from the stagnant battlefields in and around the Middle East and devote more

attention to the Asia-Pacific region, with its prospects for dynamic growth, trade, and, in the form of China, an expansionist power that needs to be at once contained militarily and lured into the global economy. This focus on Asia came to be called the “pivot,” or “rebalancing,” but Obama had recognized its appeal and discussed it as far back as his 2008 presidential campaign. He understood, and still does, that this is where the United States’ future interests lie—but the never-ending crises of the ancient world keep pulling him back in.

LIMITED INTERESTS, LIMITED RISKS

As the ISIS imbroglio widened, yet another crisis erupted, this time in Ukraine. After Putin bribed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych with an aid package to stop him from signing an association agreement with the European Union, popular protests broke out in Kiev. When Yanukovych cracked down, the protests widened, and he was ultimately forced to flee. Putin responded by sending Russian forces to seize the Crimean Peninsula and support a secessionist rebellion in eastern Ukraine.

In NSC meetings held to decide how to respond to Russia’s move, Obama quickly approved a script of denunciation, reinforcements of U.S. military exercises in and around eastern Europe’s NATO allies (especially the Baltic states), and a string of economic sanctions.

Some Pentagon officials wanted to go further and supply the Ukrainian army with “lethal defensive weapons,” especially TOW antitank missiles. According to NSC officials, Vice President Joe Biden strongly endorsed this position, saying that the United States had a moral obligation to help the Ukrainians defend themselves, as well as a strategic interest in making Putin pay for his land grab and in deterring him from going further. (No one in any NSC meeting, however,

advocated sending Ukraine offensive weapons or deploying U.S. troops to the country.)

CEM OKSUZ / POOL / REUTERS

Obama talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice during the G20 Leaders' Summit in Antalya, Turkey, November 2015.

In the end, Obama approved the provision of nonlethal military assistance, such as night-vision and radar equipment, and training for Ukraine's National Guard. Beyond that, he was opposed. The United States had interests in Ukraine, but not vital interests. There were reasons two previous presidents had considered, then decided against, inviting Kiev's leaders to join NATO. First, polls had suggested that less than half of Ukrainians wanted membership. Second, Russia's interests in Ukraine, unlike the United States', were vital: Russia and Ukraine shared a border and a long history of trade, cultural exchange, and even common statehood. No Russian leader would stand by as Ukraine drifted too far from

Moscow’s orbit.

Obama likes to look ahead two or three steps. (His critics have seen this as a technique for avoiding the use of force; others see it as a method of rational decision-making.) Moscow could and would match or surpass any lethal weapons that the West supplied to Kiev. Then what? If Washington sent still more arms, it would risk getting sucked into an arms race, and the violence would intensify. If the United States did not respond in kind, the West would have lost the contest; Obama would look weaker, and Russia stronger, than if he had not sent any arms in the first place.

This was Obama’s first principle in all discussions about the crisis: he was not going to risk a war with Russia for the sake of Ukraine. At one meeting, he said, “If I wanted to invade Canada or Mexico, no one could do much about it.” The same was true of Putin and Ukraine.

Still, Obama put a high value on enforcing international norms, one of which was the inviolability of borders. He felt it necessary to make Russia pay for its violation; the question was how. Military escalation, in this context, was a game Russia would win, but escalation of sanctions was one the United States could win, if Obama could keep European states on board. This was a challenge, for many European countries were more reliant on Russian energy supplies than the United States was and therefore more vulnerable to economic reprisals from Russia. They were also dead set against risking war over Ukraine. If Obama went up the military ladder, he knew they would drop out of the sanctions regime.

> *Obama’s keen legal mind allows him to rationalize his own porous positions.*

At least through the fall of 2015, Obama’s policy has worked.

Despite Putin’s efforts to split the transatlantic alliance, its members have held tight on the sanctions, and the cease-fire negotiated in Minsk in February has held, too. Putin’s likely goal in Ukraine was to weaken the country’s central government and keep it from moving closer to the West. At that, he has succeeded. If Obama and the western European nations had wanted to strike back on that front, tens of billions of dollars in economic aid would have meant a lot more than a few hundred antitank missiles. But beyond a relatively paltry International Monetary Fund grant, no one seemed to want to go down that road.

PATIENCE AND PRAGMATISM

So how does Obama’s record stack up? The president has been besieged by foreign policy crises, constrained by diminished American power, and pressured by opponents at home and allies abroad to take action and show leadership, even when dealing with intractable problems. He has learned on the job, with his instincts for caution reinforced by the ill-fated Libyan intervention. And he has, at times, talked more boldly than he has acted, creating a needless gap between words and deeds.

And yet for the most part, he has stayed true to the template of his Nobel address, keeping sight of the big picture as others have gotten lost in the shrubs. His caution about embarking on unnecessary military adventures and desire to avoid escalatory military spirals seem wise. Obama has also proved remarkably patient with drawn-out diplomatic negotiations, even those unlikely to bear fruit. Some of these, such as the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, have predictably gone nowhere, but others, such as the opening to Cuba and the nuclear deal with Iran, have been strikingly successful.

The successes and failures stem, in part, from the dogged optimism of Obama’s second-term secretary of state, Kerry. It

is doubtful that Kerry's more cautious predecessor, Clinton, or most other past secretaries of state, would have stuck with the nuclear talks with Iran for as long as Kerry did—but neither would she have spent so much time and effort trying to jump-start a moribund Middle East peace process.

One downside to Kerry's vision of his job, as special envoy to the world's most hopeless logjams, is that it leaves much of the rest of the world a bit anxious. This has been especially true of the United States' allies in Asia—most of all Japan, whose leaders demand constant handholding. During Obama's first term, Kurt Campbell, the assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, phoned his counterpart in Tokyo every day and met face-to-face with the Japanese ambassador three times a week. Officials who deal with Asian affairs say that after Campbell left, and Kerry turned the State Department's focus almost exclusively to high-profile peace missions, Tokyo felt abandoned.

Still, this hardly amounted to a crisis. First, when Beijing started flexing its naval muscles in the South China Sea, Japan (and Australia and South Korea) clung ever closer to Washington, however frustrated it felt at times. Second, another big part of the United States' relations with Asia involves simply showing up—and although the assistant secretary may not be calling as often, Obama and Kerry show up at all the Asian security and economic summits. Anxiety about abandonment remains; it has been a factor for decades, at least since the United States pulled out of Vietnam and secretly reached out to China during the presidency of Richard Nixon. But Obama's missteps, which have bothered allies in the Middle East, have not weighed at all on those in East Asia. Daniel Sneider, the associate director for research at the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University, has met privately with dozens of political and military leaders from Japan and South Korea. He says, "I've never heard any of them say a word about the 'redline'

in Syria.”

On August 5, 2015, the president delivered a spirited speech at American University defending the nuclear deal that he and five other world powers had negotiated with Iran. Several times, he quoted Kennedy’s famous American University speech in 1963 calling for an end to the Cold War mindset and a new strategy based on a “practical” and “attainable peace,” one based “not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions—on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements.”

Later that day, Obama held an on-the-record roundtable discussion with ten columnists in the White House. When my turn came to ask a question, I noted that Kennedy had delivered his speech after several crises in which he realized that his advisers were often wrong and that he should place more trust in his own instincts. What lessons, I asked Obama, had he learned in his crises? What decisions might he have made differently, had he known then what he knows now? He answered:

> *I would say that I have been consistent in my broad view of how American power should be deployed and the view that we underestimate our power when we restrict it to just our military power. . . . There’s no doubt that, after six and a half years, I am that much more confident in the assessments I make and can probably see around the corners faster than I did when I first came into office. The map isn’t always the territory, and you have to kind of walk through it to get a feel for it.*
>
> *In terms of decisions I make, I do think that I have a better sense of how military action can result in unintended consequences. And I am confirmed in my belief that much of the time, we are making judgments*

> *based on percentages, and . . . there are always going to be some complications.*
>
> *And so maybe at the same time as I'm more confident today, I'm also more humble. And that's part of the reason why, when I see a situation like this one [the possibility of a nuclear deal with Iran], where we can achieve an objective with a unified world behind us and we preserve our hedge against its not working out, I think it would be foolish—even tragic—for us to pass up on that opportunity.*

CORRECTION APPENDED (December 11, 2015) This article has been updated to correct the date that President Obama delivered a speech about the Iran nuclear deal at American University. It was August 5, 2015, not April 5.

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The End of Pax Americana

Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense

Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson

SCOTT PETERSON / GETTY IMAGES

Don't look back: U.S. soldiers leaving Iraq, December 2011.

The Obama administration has clearly pulled back from the United States' recent interventionism in the Middle East, notwithstanding the rise of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) and the U.S.-led air war against it. Critics pin the change on the administration's aversion to U.S. activism in the region, its unwillingness to engage in major combat operations, or President Barack Obama's alleged ideological

preference for diminished global engagement. But the reality is that Washington's post-9/11 interventions in the region—especially the one in Iraq—were anomalous and shaped false perceptions of a "new normal" of American intervention, both at home and in the region. The administration's unwillingness to use ground forces in Iraq or Syria constitutes not so much a withdrawal as a correction—an attempt to restore the stability that had endured for several decades thanks to American restraint, not American aggressiveness.

It's possible to argue that pulling back is less a choice than a necessity. Some realist observers claim that in a time of economic uncertainty and cuts to the U.S. military budget, an expansive U.S. policy in the region has simply become too costly. According to that view, the United States, like the United Kingdom before it, is the victim of its own "imperial overstretch." Others argue that U.S. policy initiatives, especially the recent negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, have distanced Washington from its traditional Middle Eastern allies; in other words, the United States isn't pulling back so much as pushing away.

> *The long period of American primacy in the Middle East is ending.*

In actuality, however, the main driver of the U.S. pullback is not what's happening in Washington but what's happening in the region. Political and economic developments in the Middle East have reduced the opportunities for effective American intervention to a vanishing point, and policymakers in Washington have been recognizing that and acting accordingly. Given this, the moderate U.S. pullback should be not reversed but rather continued, at least in the absence of a significant threat to core U.S. interests.

BACK TO NORMAL

Between World War II and the 9/11 attacks, the United States was the quintessential status quo power in the Middle East, undertaking military intervention in the region only in exceptional circumstances. Direct U.S. military involvement was nonexistent, minimal, or indirect in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the 1956 Suez crisis, the Six-Day War in 1967, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. The 1982–84 U.S. peacekeeping mission in Lebanon was a notorious failure and gave rise to the “overwhelming force” doctrine, which precluded subsequent U.S. interventions until Saddam Hussein’s extraordinarily reckless invasion of Kuwait forced Washington’s hand in 1990.

Washington didn’t need a forward-leaning policy because U.S. interests largely coincided with those of its strategic allies and partners in the region and could be served through economic and diplomatic relations combined with a modest military presence. The United States and the Gulf Arab states shared a paramount need to maintain stable oil supplies and prices and, more broadly, political stability. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the United States, Israel, and the Gulf Arab states have had the mutual objective of containing Iran. Beginning with the Camp David accords in 1978, American, Egyptian, and Israeli interests converged, and their trilateral relationship was reinforced by substantial U.S. aid to Egypt and Israel alike. And even after 9/11, the United States, Israel, and the Gulf Arab states had shared priorities in their fights against terrorism.

CAROLYN KASTER / POOL / REUTERS

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter arrives at King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, July 2015.

Over the past decade, however, several factors largely unrelated to Washington's own policy agenda have weakened the bases for these alliances and partnerships. First, the advent of hydraulic fracturing has dramatically reduced direct U.S. dependence on Gulf oil and diminished the strategic value and priority of the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf Arab states: indeed, the United States will soon overtake Saudi Arabia as the world's largest producer of crude oil and will need to import less fossil fuel. Although Gulf producers will keep determining the world price of oil and U.S. companies will continue to have a stake in the Gulf's wells, the United States will enjoy greater policy discretion and flexibility.

The spread and intensification of jihadism have also weakened the strategic links between the United States and its regional partners. A decade ago, a combination of

American pressure and the shock of large-scale al Qaeda attacks inside Saudi Arabia convinced the Saudis and their neighbors to clamp down on jihadist activities within their own borders. Yet today, the Gulf Arab states have subordinated the suppression of jihadism to the goal of overthrowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and hobbling his patrons in Iran. They are doing this by backing Sunni extremist rebels in Syria despite Washington's exhortations to stop and Saudi Arabia's own desire to avoid a post-Assad Syria ruled by radicals. The United States' regional partners see themselves as less and less answerable to Washington, and Washington feels less obligated to protect the interests of those partners, which seem increasingly parochial and remote from American interests and values. In addition, widespread Islamic radicalization has driven the emergence of a genuine pan-Islamic identity that complicates Western involvement in the Middle East. Consider, for example, the unwillingness of many moderate Sunni Syrian opponents of Assad to accept European or U.S. help, which they believe will disqualify them in the eyes of Islamists.

Meanwhile, from the United States' standpoint, the Middle East has become a highly dubious place to invest owing to systemic political and economic dysfunction. The region features little water, sparse agriculture, and a massive oversupply of labor. Of the Middle Eastern countries that still function, most run large fiscal and external deficits, maintain huge and inefficient civil service payrolls, and heavily subsidize fuel and other necessities for their populations; lower oil revenues will probably limit the Gulf states' ability to finance those creaky mechanisms. Active conflicts in many Middle Eastern states have displaced large proportions of their populations and deprived their young people of educational opportunities and hope for the future. These conditions have produced either abject despair or, what is more ominous, political and religious radicalization. The effort

to remake the Middle East as an incubator of liberal democracy that would pacify young Muslims failed even when the United States had plenty of cash to throw at the project and more reasons for optimism about its prospects, in the years immediately following the 9/11 attacks.

> *The potential for American military power to effect major change in the region is diminishing.*

Finally, groups within Middle Eastern societies that were once reliable bastions of pro-Western sentiment—such as national militaries, oil-industry elites, and secular technocrats—have generally seen their influence wane. And in instances where traditional pro-Western elements have retained power, their interests and policies now increasingly diverge from American ones. The Egyptian military, for example, served for decades as a pillar of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship. Thanks to the coup it launched in 2013 that placed the former army general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi at the top of a new authoritarian regime, the military now exerts more control than ever in Egypt. But this hardly augurs well for Washington: if past is prologue, the military's brutal suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood will almost certainly lead to an increase in jihadist violence and thus expose the United States to the very blowback that its assistance to Egypt is intended to prevent. Hopes in the 1950s and 1960s for the ascendance of a secular, technocratic, Western-oriented Arab elite that would bring their societies with them have long since faded.

POWERFUL BUT POWERLESS

At the same time that the salience of the Middle East to U.S. policy is waning and the interests of the United States and its traditional partners in the Middle East are diverging, the potential for American military power to effect major change in the region is also diminishing. The decentralization of al

Qaeda and the emergence of ISIS, a jihadist expeditionary force and quasi state, have increased the asymmetries between U.S. military capabilities and the most urgent threats facing the region. As U.S.-occupied Iraq slid toward civil war in 2006, the Pentagon moved toward improving U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine and practice, revamping the military's structure to emphasize irregular warfare and special operations. But liberal and accountable democratic governments find it difficult to marshal either the staying power or the savagery that is usually required to suppress an unruly and committed indigenous group—especially a regionwide social movement such as ISIS, which does not recognize physical or political boundaries. This is particularly true when outside powers have no local partners with substantial bureaucratic cohesion or popular legitimacy. The United States still has the resources and resilience to sustain wars against modern nationalist states that would end with clear victors and enforceable outcomes. But Americans have learned the hard way that a transnational clash of ethnicities turbocharged by religious narratives is vastly harder to navigate, let alone manipulate.

A U.S.-led military operation against ISIS, for instance, would no doubt produce impressive and gratifying battlefield victories. But the aftermath of the conflict would drive home the ultimate futility of the project. Solidifying any tactical gains would require political will backed by the support of the American public; a large cadre of deployable civilian experts in reconstruction and stabilization; deep knowledge of the society for whose fate a victorious United States would take responsibility; and, most problematic, a sustained military force to provide security for populations and infrastructure. Even if all those conditions were present, Washington would struggle to find dependable and dedicated local constituents or clients, or indeed allies, to assist. If this sounds familiar, it is because it is the same list of things that Washington wasn't

able to put together the last two times it launched major military interventions in the Middle East, with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the NATO air campaign against Libya in 2011. Put simply, the United States would likely lose another war in the Middle East for all the same reasons it lost the last two.

Staff Sgt. Kevin Moses Sr / U.S. Army / Handout / Reuters
U.S. soldiers on patrol in Shakaria, Iraq, January 2006.

Even a less intensive, counterterrorism-based approach to ISIS, which would involve steady drone strikes and periodic commando operations, would carry grave risks. Collateral damage from U.S. drone attacks, for example, has made it harder for the Pakistani government to extend deeper cooperation to the United States. Five years ago, U.S. military officials took great pride in special operations raids in Afghanistan that resulted in the death or capture of high-value Taliban operatives. But the civilian casualties the raids produced undermined strategic goals by enraging locals and driving them back into the Taliban’s orbit.

For these reasons, U.S. policymakers should entertain serious doubts about taking ownership of any of the Middle East’s

ongoing conflicts. Precisely those kinds of doubts explain and justify the Obama administration's unwillingness to intervene more forcefully in Syria. For a period in 2012 and early 2013, the administration considered a full range of options for Syria, including U.S.- enforced no-fly and buffer zones, regime change by force (facilitated by far more substantial American and allied military assistance to anti-Assad rebels), and limited retaliatory air strikes against the regime in response to its use of chemical weapons. But the growing involvement of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah in defending Assad would have meant an unabashed U.S. proxy war with Iran that could have escalated and spilled over into the rest of region. That would have made it impossible to carry on fruitful talks with Tehran about curtailing its nuclear program and would have forced the United States to surpass Iran's high levels of commitment and investment in the conflict. In addition, a U.S.-led intervention would have enjoyed very little international backing: China and Russia would have vetoed any UN resolution authorizing it, just as they had vetoed far less muscular resolutions, and the Arab League and NATO would not have endorsed it. And major Western military action would likely have intensified the spread of jihadism in Syria, as it had elsewhere.

KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

The United States' primary interest in the Middle East is regional stability. For now at least, constraints on U.S. power and the complex, interdependent nature of U.S. interests in the region—as well as the likelihood of sustained U.S.-Chinese rivalry that will inevitably divert U.S. strategic attention to the Asia-Pacific region—suggest that the best Middle East policy for Washington would be something closer to what international relations theorists call "offshore balancing": refraining from engagement in overseas military operations and forgoing quasi-imperial nation building to focus instead

on selectively using its considerable leverage to exert influence and protect U.S. interests. Washington needs to husband U.S. power in the Middle East, unless a genuine existential threat to its regional allies arises, which is unlikely. This course will require Washington to avoid any further projection of U.S. military power in the region—for example, a large-scale deployment of combat ground troops to fight ISIS.

Critics of U.S. restraint argue that in the absence of strongly asserted U.S. power, Iran or other U.S. nemeses will be emboldened—that restraint will lead to war. But U.S. adversaries will likely judge Washington's resolve on the basis of conditions as they appear in the moment those adversaries are seriously considering aggressive actions, irrespective of conditions that existed years or months before. As long as the limits of U.S. restraint are clearly enunciated and Washington makes plain that its alliance with Israel remains undiminished, Iran will be loath to confront Israel or act much more aggressively in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, or elsewhere in the region for fear of triggering a decisive American response that could scupper the nuclear deal and revive the painful sanctions that drove Tehran to the bargaining table in the first place. In any case, the question of whether saber rattling will provoke or deter a potential adversary can never be answered with complete confidence, since decision-makers often misjudge the perceptions and temperament of their rivals.

> *U.S. policymakers should entertain serious doubts about taking ownership of any of the Middle East's ongoing conflicts.*

Whether rapprochement is a promising paradigm for U.S.-Iranian relations remains to be seen. Iran clearly seeks to exert its influence wherever it can, but it's far from clear that

it can dominate the region. Iranian influence in Iraq was aided by the vacuum created by the U.S. invasion but stems more broadly from the demographic and political primacy of Iraq’s Shiites and is thus unavoidable. As long as Baghdad remains dependent on the United States for countering ISIS, Washington should retain sufficient leverage to moderate Iraqi politics and limit Iran’s sway. Iranian support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen and for dissident Shiites in Bahrain is more opportunistic than strategic and therefore unlikely to permanently shift the balance of power in either place. Tehran’s meddling in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict doesn’t rise to the level of a strategic challenge: the Palestinian militant group Hamas has not been able to translate Iranian largess into a serious advantage over Israel, let alone Egypt and the Palestinian Authority, all of which oppose Hamas. Iran’s footholds in Lebanon and Syria go back decades, but even though its proxies in both places have steadily increased their commitment to defend the Assad regime, they have been unable to avert Syria’s de facto partition. Even if Iran chooses to make Syria its Vietnam, the best it could probably manage against an externally supported anti-Assad opposition would be to consolidate the status quo while sharing the meager rewards with Moscow. Syria, then, would be a springboard for Iranian mischief but hardly a platform for controlling the region. In short, even with the nuclear deal in place, Iran won’t be able to do much more now—and possibly even less—than it was able to do in the past.

The nuclear deal has produced a genuine split between the Americans and the Israelis, who believe that the deal’s terms are too lenient and won’t prevent the Iranians from developing a nuclear weapon. But the divide is unlikely to have dire practical consequences. Washington has an obligation to maintain its unique relationship with Israel and has a strategic interest in preserving bilateral links with the Israeli military, which is by far the region’s most powerful

fighting force. The nuclear deal with Iran also upset the Gulf Arab states. But Washington's global economic responsibilities and its substantial counterterrorist interests still require the United States to safeguard its strategic relationship with those countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. And the Gulf Arab states retain a stronger cultural connection with the United States than with any other major power: Gulf elites send their children to American universities as opposed to Chinese, Russian, or European ones.

The Israelis and the Gulf Arabs need not panic: prudence dictates a serviceable regional U.S. military presence to prevent ISIS from expanding further (into Jordan, for example) and to deter Iranian breaches of the nuclear deal and respond to any destabilizing Iranian moves, such as a major ground intervention in Iraq. The American military footprint in the region should not change. At least one U.S. carrier battle group should remain assigned to the Arabian Sea. The structure and personnel strength of U.S. military bases in the Middle East should stay the same. The air campaign against ISIS should continue, and American troops will still need to be deployed occasionally on a selective basis to quell terrorist threats or even respond in a limited way to large-scale atrocities or environmental disasters. But a resolute policy of restraint requires that any major expeditionary military ground intervention on the part of the United States in the Middle East be avoided and that regional partners be encouraged to take on more responsibility for their own security.

AIM LOWER, SCORE HIGHER

In addition to affirming its pullback from the military interventionism of the post-9/11 era, Washington needs to recalibrate its diplomatic priorities. The aftermath of the Arab revolts of 2011—especially those in Egypt, Libya, and Syria—demonstrated that most Middle Eastern societies are not ready to take significant steps toward democracy, and so

American attempts to promote further political liberalization in the region should be more subdued. U.S. officials should also recognize that a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians is highly unlikely to take shape in the medium term. The United States' dogged determination to accomplish that objective, even in the least propitious circumstances, has created a moral hazard. Successive Israeli governments have been able to thwart Washington's peacemaking efforts with near impunity, confident that the Americans would continue to try no matter what. In turn, the United States' inability to facilitate an agreement has contributed to perceptions of Washington as a declining power—even as some U.S. allies in the Gulf see U.S. pressure on Israel as another example of U.S. faithlessness as an ally.

The United States should always support the goals of democratization and Israeli-Palestinian peace. But in the medium term, rather than unrealistically clinging to those aims, Washington should try to capitalize on the Iran nuclear deal to improve relations with Tehran. If the implementation of the deal gets off to a relatively smooth start, Washington should probe Tehran's flexibility in other areas with an eye to fostering a kind of modus vivendi between the Iranians and the Saudis—something that looks very unlikely now, as it has for years. One way to do so would be to bring Iran and other governments together in an effort to end the Syrian civil war through a political agreement. The emerging recognition among the major players—the United States, Russia, Iran, and the Gulf Arab states—is that, although ISIS' dream of a border-busting caliphate remains out of the group's reach, the ongoing conflict in Syria risks dangerously empowering ISIS and accelerating the propagation of its extremist ideology.

Noah Browning / REUTERS
Emirati soldiers in a helicopter over Yemen en route to a Saudi-led coalition air base in Saudi Arabia, September 2015.

But each player has also come to realize that its preferred method of solving the Syrian crisis is probably unworkable. For the United States and its Gulf partners, supporting forcible regime change by Syrian rebels who are increasingly infiltrated or co-opted by ISIS appears counterproductive as well as operationally dubious. At the same time, after more than four years of a military stalemate, it is clear that Iran's ongoing support for Assad and Russia's recent intensification of its aid to the regime can merely help maintain the status quo but cannot decisively swing conditions in Assad's favor. Both Tehran and Moscow seem to understand that regardless of their support, Assad's regime is weaker than ever and it will probably prove impossible to reconstitute a unitary Syria ruled exclusively by the regime. For mainly these reasons, both Iran and Russia have recently shown more interest in exploring a negotiated settlement. Although Russia's protestations that it is not wedded to Assad are disingenuous, Moscow has supported the UN Security Council's investigation of the regime's apparent use of indiscriminate barrel bombs filled with poisonous chlorine gas and has backed the Security Council's August 2015 statement

reinvigorating the quest for a political transition in Syria. Tehran, with Hezbollah's support, has been pushing a peace plan involving a national unity government and a revised constitution, although one under which Assad or his regime would remain in power at least in the short term.

A realistic mechanism for taking advantage of these tenuously converging interests has not materialized. But the Iran nuclear deal has demonstrated the potential of diplomacy to ameliorate regional crises. In addition to countering the spread of jihadism, a U.S.-brokered agreement to end the Syrian civil war would mitigate and eventually end the world's most pressing humanitarian crisis and restore much of the American prestige that has waned in the region. Effective and inclusive conflict resolution on Syria would also validate the rapprochement with Iran and might help convince the Israelis of the efficacy of the United States' new approach.

Washington should leverage the new diplomatic bonds that the nuclear negotiations forged among the major powers—and, in particular, between U.S. and Iranian officials—to reinvigorate multinational talks on Syria's transition. An initial step might be to reconvene the Geneva II conference, which foundered in February 2014, gathering the original parties and adding Iran to the mix. Russia's insistence that Assad's departure cannot be a precondition to political talks should not be a deal breaker and in fact could be an enticement for Iran to participate, which U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry might now be able to facilitate through a direct appeal to Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. The Gulf Arab states' cautious endorsement of the nuclear agreement and Saudi Arabia's participation in trilateral talks with the United States and Russia on Syria in early August suggest that the Gulf Arabs are growing more comfortable with diplomacy as a means of easing strategic tensions with Iran. On account of their heightened perception

of the ISIS threat, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey might now drop their insistence that Assad depart prior to negotiations.

> *The best Middle East policy for Washington would be closer to what international relations theorists call "offshore balancing."*

The hardest part, of course, will be arriving at plausible transitional arrangements. One possibility would be to create a power-sharing body with executive authority that could marginalize ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syria-based militant group affiliated with al Qaeda, as implicitly contemplated in the August UN Security Council statement. Another would be to partition the country to some degree and establish a confederacy of sorts to replace central rule from Damascus. Tactical cease-fires reached between the regime and moderate opposition forces could serve as the building blocks for those kinds of broader political arrangements and might also allow the parties to focus on fighting the jihadist factions, which represent a common enemy.

MATURE WITHDRAWAL

The long period of American primacy in the Middle East is ending. Although the Iraq war damaged Washington's credibility and empowered U.S. adversaries, by the time the United States invaded Iraq, the region was already becoming less malleable all on its own. The United States should not and cannot withdraw in a literal sense, but it should continue to pull back, both to service strategic priorities elsewhere and in recognition of its dwindling influence. Neither the United States nor its regional partners want to see Iran with nuclear weapons or substantially increased regional influence. And none of the main players in the region wants to see a quantum leap in the power of ISIS or other Salafi jihadist organizations. But because the United States' leverage has diminished, it must concentrate on forging regional stability.

That would be a wiser approach than pushing for improbable political liberalization and a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as the Obama administration has done, or trying to transform the region through the use of force, a strategy that the Bush administration relied on with woeful results.

In particular, Washington must acknowledge that reducing its military role will mean that its allies will exercise greater independence in their own military decisions. In turn, U.S. allies need to understand just how much support Washington is willing to provide before they launch risky military adventures, such as Saudi Arabia's recent strikes against the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Washington and its partners need better bilateral and multilateral communications and planning. Washington will need to be clearer about what might prompt it to intervene militarily and what level of force it would use, and it will need to initiate more detailed joint planning for the full range of its possible responses.

Israel still favors confronting Iran instead of smoothing relations, and Washington will have to strictly police the nuclear deal to convince the Israelis of its effectiveness. But as ISIS has risen, the Gulf Arab states and Turkey have warmed a bit to the United States' approach to Iran and to Washington's position that containing the spread of jihadism is now more important than achieving regime change in Syria.

For Washington to successfully commit itself to a constructive pullback from the Middle East, it will need to make its best efforts to avoid directly impeding the priorities of its regional allies and partners—and it should demand that its friends in the region do the same. That will require focused diplomacy supported by clear articulations of Washington's commitment to its core interests. Washington should stress, in particular, that the Iran nuclear deal will actually ensure, rather than threaten, sustained U.S. diplomatic engagement in the region.

Instead of reversing course, Washington needs to embrace the idea of establishing a healthier equilibrium in U.S.–Middle Eastern relations, one that involves a lighter management role for the United States. The military-centric interventionism of the past 14 years was an aberration from a longer history of American restraint; it must not harden into a new long-term norm.

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Fight or Flight

America’s Choice in the Middle East

Kenneth M. Pollack

SEBASTIANO TOMADA / GETTY IMAGES

Houthi fighters patrol the main street of Sadah, Yemen, June 2015.

The modern Middle East has rarely been tranquil, but it has never been this bad. Full-blown civil wars rage in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Nascent conflicts simmer in Egypt, South Sudan, and Turkey. Various forms of spillover from these civil wars threaten the stability of Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia. Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have risen to new heights, raising the specter of a regionwide religious war. Israel and the Palestinians have experienced a resurgence of low-level violence. Kuwait, Morocco, Oman,

Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have weathered the storm so far, but even they are terrified of what is going on around them. Not since the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century has the Middle East seen so much chaos.

Moreover, it is unlikely to abate anytime soon. No matter how many times Americans insist that the people of the Middle East will come to their senses and resolve their differences if left to their own devices, they never do. Absent external involvement, the region's leaders consistently opt for strategies that exacerbate conflict and feed perpetual instability. Civil wars are particularly stubborn problems, and without decisive outside intervention, they usually last decades. The Congolese civil war is entering its 22nd year, the Peruvian its 36th, and the Afghan its 37th. There is no reason to expect the Middle East's conflicts to burn out on their own either.

> *Even as the Middle East careens out of control, help is not on the way.*

As a consequence, the next U.S. president is going to face a choice in the Middle East: do much more to stabilize it, or disengage from it much more. But given how tempestuous the region has become, both options—stepping up and stepping back—will cost the United States far more than is typically imagined. Stabilizing the region would almost certainly require more resources, energy, attention, and political capital than most advocates of a forward-leaning U.S. posture recognize. Similarly, giving up more control and abandoning more commitments in the region would require accepting much greater risks than most in this camp acknowledge. The costs of stepping up are more manageable than the risks of stepping back, but either option would be better than muddling through.

MAN, THE STATE, AND CIVIL WAR

Grasping the real choices that the United States faces in the Middle East requires an honest understanding of what is going on there. Although it is fashionable to blame the region's travails on ancient hatreds or the poor cartography of Mr. Sykes and Monsieur Picot, the real problems began with the modern Arab state system. After World War II, the Arab states came into their own. Most shed their European colonial masters, and all adopted more modern political systems, whether secular republics (read: dictatorships) or new monarchies.

None of these states worked very well. For one thing, their economies depended heavily on oil, either directly, by pumping it themselves, or indirectly, via trade, aid, and worker remittances. These rentier economies produced too few jobs and too much wealth that their civilian populations neither controlled nor generated, encouraging the ruling elites to treat their citizenries as (mostly unwanted) dependents. The oil money bred massive corruption, along with bloated public sectors uninterested in the needs or aspirations of the wider populace. To make matters worse, the Arab states had emerged from Ottoman and European colonialism with their traditional sociocultural systems intact, which oil wealth and autocracy made it possible to preserve and even indulge.

STRINGER / REUTERS
An Iraqi soldier in Anbar Province, July 2015.

This model clunked along for several decades, before it started falling apart in the late twentieth century. The oil market became more volatile, with long periods of low prices, which created economic hardship even in oil-rich states such as Algeria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Globalization brought to the region new ideas about the relationship between government and the governed, as well as foreign cultural influences. Arabs (and Iranians, for that matter) increasingly demanded that their governments help fix their problems. But all they got in response was malign neglect.

By the 1990s, popular discontent had risen throughout the Middle East. The Muslim Brotherhood and its many franchises grew quickly as a political opposition to the regimes. Others turned to violence—rioters in the Nejd region of Saudi Arabia, Islamist insurgents in Egypt, and various terrorist groups elsewhere—all seeking to overthrow their governments. Eventually, some of these groups would decide that they first had to drive away the foreign backers of those governments, starting with the United States.

The pent-up frustrations and desire for political change finally

exploded in the Arab Spring of 2011, with large-scale protests breaking out in nearly all Arab countries and the toppling or crippling of the regime in five of them. But revolutions are always tricky things to get right. That has proved especially true in the Arab world, where the autocrats in each country had done a superb job of eliminating any charismatic opposition leader who might have unified the country after the fall of the regime and where there were no popular alternative ideas about how to organize a new Arab state. And so in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the result has been state failure, a security vacuum, and civil war.

> *The Middle East's travails began with the modern Arab state system.*

If the first-order problem of the Middle East is the failure of the postwar Arab state system, the outbreak of civil wars has become an equally important second-order problem. These conflicts have taken on lives of their own, becoming engines of instability that now pose the greatest immediate threat to both the people of the region and the rest of the world.

For one thing, civil wars have a bad habit of spilling over into their neighbors. Vast numbers of refugees cross borders, as do smaller, but no less problematic, numbers of terrorists and other armed combatants. So do ideas promoting militancy, revolution, and secession. In this way, neighboring states can themselves succumb to instability or even internal conflict. Indeed, scholars have found that the strongest predictor that a state will experience a civil war is whether it borders a country already embroiled in one.

Civil wars also have a bad habit of sucking in neighboring countries. Seeking to protect their interests and prevent spillover, states typically choose particular combatants to back. But that brings them into conflict with other

neighboring states that have picked their own favorites. Even if this competition remains a proxy fight, it can still be economically and politically draining, even ruinous. At worst, the conflict can lead to a regional war, when a state, convinced its proxy is not doing the job, sends in its own armed forces. For evidence of this dynamic, one need look no further than the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, or Iranian and Russian military operations in Iraq and Syria.

KHALED AL-HARIRI / REUTERS

Soldiers loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad play football in Homs, May 2014.

WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS

As if the failure of the postwar Arab state system and the outbreak of four civil wars weren't bad enough, in the midst of all of this, the United States has distanced itself from the region. The Middle East has not been without a great-power overseer of one kind or another since the Ottoman conquests of the sixteenth century. This is not to suggest that the

external hegemon was always an unalloyed good; it wasn't. But it often played the constructive role of mitigating conflict. Good or bad, the states of the region have grown accustomed to interacting with one another with a dominating third party in the room, figuratively and often literally.

Disengagement has been most damaging in Iraq. The U.S. withdrawal from the country was the most important of a range of factors that pulled it back into civil war. Scholars have long recognized that shepherding a nation out of a civil war requires some internal or external peacekeeper to guarantee the terms of a new power-sharing arrangement among the warring parties. Over time, that role can become increasingly symbolic, as was the case with NATO in Bosnia. The alliance's presence there dwindled to a militarily insignificant force within about five years, but it still played a crucial political and psychological role in reassuring the rival factions that none of them would return to violence. In the case of Iraq, the United States played that role, and its disengagement in 2010 and 2011 led to exactly what history predicted.

This phenomenon has played out more broadly across the Middle East. The withdrawal of the United States has forced governments there to interact in a novel way, without the hope that Washington will provide a cooperative path out of the security dilemmas that litter the region. U.S. disengagement has made many states fear that others will become more aggressive without the United States to restrain them. That fear has caused them to act more aggressively themselves, which in turn has sparked more severe countermoves, again in the expectation that the United States will not check either the original move or the riposte. This dynamic has grown most acute between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose tit-for-tat exchange is growing ever more vituperative and violent. The Saudis have taken the stunning step of directly intervening in Yemen's civil war against the

country's Houthi minority, which they consider to be an Iranian proxy that threatens their southern flank.

> *If the next U.S. president is unwilling to commit to stepping up to stabilize the Middle East, the only real alternative is to step back.*

Even as the Middle East careens out of control, help is not on the way. The Obama administration's policies toward the region are not designed to mitigate, let alone end, its real problems. That is why the region has gotten worse since President Barack Obama entered office, and why there is no reason to believe that it will get any better before he leaves office.

In his 2009 speech in Cairo, Obama did claim that the United States would try to help the region shift to a new Arab state system, but he never backed his speech up with an actual policy, let alone resources. Then, in 2011, the administration failed to put in place a coherent strategy to deal with the Arab Spring, one that might have assisted a transition to more stable, pluralistic systems of government. Having missed its best opportunities, Washington now barely pays lip service to the need for gradual, long-term reform.

As for the civil wars, the administration has focused on addressing only their symptoms—trying to contain the spillover—by attacking the Islamic State, or ISIS; accepting some refugees; and working to prevent terrorist attacks back home. But the history of civil wars demonstrates that it is extremely hard to contain the spillover, and the Middle East today is proving no exception. Spillover from Syria helped push Iraq back into civil war. In turn, spillover from the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars has generated a low-level civil war in Turkey and threatens to do the same in Jordan and Lebanon. Spillover from Libya is destabilizing Egypt, Mali, and Tunisia.

The Iraqi, Syrian, and Yemeni civil wars have sucked Iran and the Gulf states into a vicious proxy war fought across all three battlefields. And refugees, terrorists, and radicalization spilling over from all these wars have created new dilemmas for Europe and North America.

In fact, it is effectively impossible to eradicate the symptoms of civil wars without treating the underlying maladies. No matter how many thousands of refugees the West accepts, as long as the civil wars grind on, millions more will flee. And no matter how many terrorists the United States kills, without an end to the civil wars, more young men will keep turning to terrorism. Over the past 15 years, the threat from Salafi jihadism has grown by orders of magnitude despite the damage that the United States has inflicted on al Qaeda's core in Afghanistan. In places racked by civil war, the group's offshoots, including ISIS, are finding new recruits, new sanctuaries, and new fields of jihad. But where order prevails, they dissipate. Neither al Qaeda nor ISIS has found much purchase in any of the remaining strong states of the region. And when the United States brought stability to Iraq beginning in 2007, al Qaeda's franchise there was pushed to the brink of extinction, only to find salvation in 2011, when civil war broke out next door in Syria.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, moreover, it is possible for a third party to settle a civil war long before it might end on its own. Scholars of civil wars have found that in about 20 percent of the cases since 1945, and roughly 40 percent of the cases since 1995, an external actor was able to engineer just such an outcome. Doing so is not easy, of course, but it need not be as ruinously expensive as the United States' painful experience in Iraq.

Ending a civil war requires the intervening power to accomplish three objectives. First, it must change the military dynamics such that none of the warring parties believes that

it can win a military victory and none fears that its fighters will be slaughtered once they lay down their arms. Second, it must forge a power-sharing agreement among the various groups so that they all have an equitable stake in a new government. And third, it must put in place institutions that reassure all the parties that the first two conditions will endure. To some extent unknowingly, that is precisely the path NATO followed in Bosnia in 1994–95 and the United States followed in Iraq in 2007–10.

History also shows that when outside powers stray from this approach or commit inadequate resources to it, their interventions inevitably fail and typically make the conflicts bloodier, longer, and less contained. No wonder U.S. policy toward Iraq and Syria (let alone Libya and Yemen) has failed since 2011. And as long as the United States continues to avoid pursuing the one approach that can work, there is no reason to expect anything else. At most, the U.S. military's current campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria will engineer the same outcome as its earlier one against al Qaeda in Afghanistan: the United States may badly damage ISIS, but unless it ends the conflicts that sustain it, the group will morph and spread and eventually be succeeded by the son of ISIS, just as ISIS is the son of al Qaeda.

MOHAMED AL-SAYAGHI / REUTERS

A man mourns for relatives killed by an air strike in Sanaa, Yemen, September 2015.

STEPPING UP

Stabilizing the Middle East will require a new approach—one that attacks the root causes of the region's troubles and is backed up by adequate resources. The first priority should be to shut down the current civil wars. In every case, that will require first changing the battlefield dynamics to convince all the warring factions that military victory is impossible. In an ideal world, that would entail sending at least small numbers of U.S. combat forces to Iraq (perhaps 10,000) and potentially Syria. But if the political will for even a modest commitment of forces does not exist, then more advisers, airpower, intelligence sharing, and logistical support could suffice, albeit with a lower likelihood of success.

Regardless, the United States and its allies will also have to build new indigenous militaries able to first defeat the terrorists, militias, and extremists and then serve as the

foundation for a new state. In Iraq, that means retraining and reforming the Iraqi security forces to a much greater degree than current U.S. policy envisions. In Libya, Syria, and Yemen, it would mean creating new indigenous, conventional militaries that (with considerable American support) would be able to defeat any potential rival, secure the civilian populaces, and enforce the terms of permanent cease-fires.

In all four civil wars, the United States and its allies will also have to undertake major political efforts aimed at forging equitable power-sharing arrangements. In Iraq, the United States should take the lead in defining both the minimal needs and the potential areas of agreement among the various Shiite and Sunni factions, just as Ryan Crocker, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq in 2007–9, and his team accomplished as part of the U.S. surge strategy. That, plus giving material resources to various moderate Iraqi political leaders and their constituencies among both the Shiites and the Sunnis, should allow the United States to hammer out a new power-sharing deal. Such an arrangement should end the alienation of the Sunni population, which lies at the heart of Iraq's current problems. This, in turn, would make it much easier for the Abadi government and the United States to stand up Sunni military formations to help liberate the Sunni-majority areas of the country from ISIS and help diminish the power of the Iranian-backed Shiite militias.

In Syria, the ongoing peace talks in Vienna provide a starting point for a political solution. But they offer little more than that, because the military conditions are not conducive to a real political compromise, let alone a permanent cessation of hostilities. Neither the Assad regime nor the Western-backed opposition believes that it can afford to stop fighting, and each of the three strongest rebel groups—Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS—remains convinced that it can achieve total victory. So until the reality on the battlefield shifts, little can be achieved at the negotiating table. If the

military situation changes, then Western diplomats should help Syria's communities fashion an arrangement that distributes political power and economic benefits equitably. The deal would have to include the Alawites, but not necessarily President Bashar al-Assad himself, and it would need to assure each faction that the new government would not oppress it, the way the Alawite minority oppressed the Sunni majority in the past.

> *Stepping back from the Middle East means risking the near-term collapse of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Turkey.*

The turmoil in Libya mirrors that in Syria, except that it is receiving far less international attention. Thus, the first step there is for the United States to convince its partners to take on a more constructive role. If the United States should lead in Iraq and Syria, then Europe needs to lead in Libya. By dint of its economic ties and proximity to Europe, Libya threatens European interests far more directly than it does American ones, and NATO's role in the 2011 intervention in Libya can serve as a precedent for European leadership. Of course, the Europeans will not take on the challenge if they are not convinced that the United States intends to do its part to quell the Middle East's civil wars, further underscoring the importance of a coherent, properly resourced U.S. strategy. To aid Europe's fight in Libya, Washington will undoubtedly have to commit assistance related to logistics, command and control, and intelligence, and possibly even combat advisers.

In Yemen, the Gulf states' air campaign has achieved little, but the intervention by a small ground force led by the United Arab Emirates has set back the rebel coalition, creating a real opportunity to negotiate an end to the conflict. Unfortunately, the Gulf states seem unwilling to offer Yemen's opposition terms that would equitably divide political power and

economic benefits, and they seem equally unwilling to offer security guarantees. To draw the conflict to a close, the United States and its allies will have to encourage their partners in the Gulf to make meaningful concessions. If that doesn't work, then the most useful thing they can do is try to convince the Gulf states to minimize their involvement in Yemen before the strain of intervention threatens their own internal cohesion.

After ending the current civil wars, the next priority of a stepped-up U.S. strategy in the Middle East will be to shore up the states in the greatest danger of sliding into future civil wars: Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Turkey. It is state failure—not external attack by ISIS, al Qaeda, or Iranian proxies—that represents the true source of the conflicts roiling the Middle East today. These four at-risk countries are all badly in need of economic assistance and infrastructure development. But above all, they need political reform to avoid state failure. Consequently, the United States and its allies should offer a range of trade benefits, financial incentives, and economic aid in return for gradual but concrete steps toward political reform. Here, the aim need not be democratization per se (although Tunisia should be strongly encouraged to continue down that path), but it should be good governance, in the form of justice and the rule of law, transparency, and a fair distribution of public goods and services.

The final piece of the puzzle is to press for reform more broadly across the Middle East—economic, social, and political. Even if the United States and its allies succeed in resolving today's civil wars, unless a new state system takes the place of the failed postwar one, the same old problems will recur. Reform will be a hard sell for the region's leaders, who have long resisted it out of a fear that it would strip them of their power and positions. Paradoxically, however, the civil wars may furnish a solution to this conundrum. All the states

of the region are terrified of the spillover from these conflicts, and they are desperate for U.S. help in eliminating the threat. In particular, many of the United States' Arab allies have grown frustrated by the gains that Iran has made by exploiting power vacuums. Just as the United States and its allies should offer the region's fragile states economic assistance in return for reform, so they should condition their efforts to end the civil wars on the willingness of the region's stronger states to embrace similar reforms.

STEPPING BACK

If the next U.S. president is unwilling to commit to stepping up to stabilize the Middle East, the only real alternative is to step back from it. Because civil wars do not lend themselves to anything but the right strategy with the right resources, trying the wrong one means throwing U.S. resources away on a lost cause. It probably also means making the situation worse, not better. Under a policy of real disengagement, the United States would abstain from involvement in the civil wars altogether. It would instead try to contain their spillover, difficult as that is, and if that were to fail, it would fall back on defending only core U.S. interests in the Middle East.

The Obama administration has done a creditable job of bolstering Jordan against chaos from Iraq and Syria so far, and stepping back from the region could still entail beefing up U.S. support to Jordan and other at-risk neighbors of the civil wars, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Turkey. All these countries want and need Western economic, diplomatic, technical, and military assistance. But because spillover has historically proved so difficult to contain, there is a high risk that one or more of them could still slide into civil war themselves, generating yet more spillover.

OMAR SANADIKI / REUTERS

A civilian inspects a site that was hit by an Israeli strike in Damascus, December 2015.

For that reason, stepping back would also require Washington to make a ruthless assessment of what is the least the United States can do to secure its vital interests in the Middle East. And although it may be a gross exaggeration to say so, in large part, U.S. interests in the region do ultimately come down to Israel, terrorism, and oil.

As poll after poll has found, a majority of Americans continue to see the safety of Israel as important to them and to the United States. Yet Israel today is as safe as the United States can make it. Israeli forces can defeat any conventional foe and deter any deterrable unconventional threat. The United States has defended Israel diplomatically and militarily countless times, including implicitly threatening the Soviet Union with nuclear war during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The United States has even taken an Iranian nuclear threat off the table for at least the next decade, thanks to the deal it

brokered last year. The only threat the United States cannot save Israel from is its own chronic civil war with the Palestinians, but the best solution to that conflict is a peace settlement that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians have demonstrated much interest in. In short, there is little more that Israel needs from the United States for its own direct security, and what it does need (such as arms sales) the United States could easily provide even if it stepped back from the Middle East.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of a reduced U.S. presence in the Middle East is that it should mitigate the threat from terrorism. Terrorists from the region attack Americans largely because they feel aggrieved by U.S. policies, just as they attack France and the United Kingdom because those countries are staunch U.S. allies (and former colonial powers) and have started to attack Russia because it has intervened in Syria. The less the United States is involved in the Middle East, the less its people are likely to be attacked by terrorists from the region. It is no accident that Switzerland does not suffer from Middle Eastern terrorism.

Of course, even if Washington disengaged from the region as much as possible, Americans would not be entirely immune from Middle Eastern terrorism. The region's conspiracy-mongers endlessly blame the United States for things it didn't do, as well as for what it did, and so terrorists could still find reasons to target Americans. Besides, even under this minimalist approach, the United States would maintain its support for Israel and Saudi Arabia, both of which a range of terrorist groups detest.

If U.S. interests concerning Israel and terrorism would largely take care of themselves in the event that Washington further diminished its role in the Middle East, the same cannot be said for the flow of oil. The idea that fracking has granted the United States energy independence is a myth; as long as the

global economy relies on fossil fuels, the United States will be vulnerable to major disruptions in the supply of oil, regardless of how much it produces. Since neither global dependence on oil nor the Middle East's contribution to the share of global production is expected to abate over the next 25 years, the United States will continue to have a critical interest in keeping Middle Eastern oil flowing.

Yet the United States need not defend every last barrel of oil in the region. The question is, how much is enough? This is where things get complicated. Many countries possess strategic reserves of oil that can mitigate a sudden, unexpected drop in production. And some, particularly Saudi Arabia, have enough excess capacity to pump and export more oil if need be. Fracking, likewise, allows North American producers of shale oil to partly compensate for shortfalls. Even though oil production in Libya has dropped by over 80 percent since 2011 as a result of its civil war, other producers have been able to make up for the loss.

Saudi Arabia, however, is in a category of its own. The country produces over ten percent of all the oil used in the world and contains the vast majority of excess capacity; even if every country emptied its strategic oil reserves and fracked like crazy, that would still not compensate for the loss of Saudi oil production. Thus, the United States will have to continue to protect its Saudi allies. But against what? No Middle Eastern state (even Iran) has the capacity to conquer Saudi Arabia, and the modest U.S. air and naval force currently in the Persian Gulf is more than adequate to defeat an Iranian attack on the country's oil infrastructure.

The kingdom's principal threats are internal. Although no one has ever made money betting against the House of Saud, the monarchy rules over a quintessentially dysfunctional postwar Arab state, one that faces daunting political, economic, and social stresses. The Shiites who make up the majority of Saudi

Arabia’s oil-rich Eastern Province have rioted and resisted government oppression for decades, and their unhappiness has grown with the widening Shiite-Sunni rift across the region. The kingdom skated through the Arab Spring primarily thanks to the far-reaching (if gradual) reform program of King Abdullah, coupled with massive cash payoffs to the people. But Abdullah died in January 2015, and his successor, King Salman, has yet to demonstrate a similar commitment to reform. Even as oil prices remain low, Salman is spending profligately at home and abroad (including on the expensive intervention in Yemen), burning through the kingdom’s sovereign wealth fund at $12–$14 billion per month. At that rate, the fund will be empty in about four years, but the king will probably face domestic challenges long before then.

How can the United States protect Saudi Arabia from itself? It is impossible to imagine any U.S. president deploying troops there to suppress a popular revolution or to hold together a failing monarchy. Moreover, the longer that civil wars burn on Saudi Arabia’s northern border, in Iraq, and southern border, in Yemen, the more likely these conflicts will destabilize the kingdom—to say nothing of the possibility of a Jordanian civil war. But a strategy of stepping back from the region means the United States will not try to shut down the nearby civil wars, and Washington has little leverage it can use to convince the Saudis to reform. It would have especially little leverage if it swore off the only thing that the Saudis truly want: greater U.S. involvement to end the civil wars and prevent Iran from exploiting them. In these circumstances, the United States would have virtually no ability to save Saudi Arabia from itself if its rulers were to insist on following a ruinous path. Yet in the context of greater U.S. disengagement, that is the most likely course the Saudis would take.

NO EXIT

Ultimately, the greatest challenge for the United States if it steps back from the Middle East is this: figuring out how to defend U.S. interests when they are threatened by problems the United States is ill equipped to solve. Because containing the spillover from civil wars is so difficult, stepping back means risking the near-term collapse of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Turkey. Although none of these countries produces much oil itself, their instability could spread to the oil producers, too, over the longer term. The world might be able to survive the loss of Iranian, Iraqi, Kuwaiti, or Algerian oil production, but at a certain point, the instability would affect Saudi Arabia. And even if it never does, it is not clear that the world can afford to lose several lesser oil producers, either.

The great benefit of a policy of stepping back is that it would drastically reduce the burden that the United States would have to bear to stabilize the Middle East. The great danger, however, is that it would entail enormous risks. Once the United States started writing off countries—shortening the list of those it would defend against threats—it is unclear where it would be able to stop, and retreat could turn into rout. If Jordan or Kuwait slid into civil war, would the United States deploy 100,000 troops to occupy and stabilize either country to protect Saudi Arabia (and in the case of civil war in Jordan, to protect Israel)? Could the United States do so in time to prevent the spillover from destabilizing the kingdom? If not, are there other ways to keep the kingdom itself from falling? Given all these uncertainties, the most prudent course is for Americans to steel themselves against the costs and step up to stabilize the region.

That said, what the United States should certainly not do is refuse to choose between stepping up and stepping back and instead waffle somewhere in the middle, committing enough resources to enlarge its burden without increasing the likelihood that its moves will make anything better. Civil wars

do not lend themselves to half measures. An outside power has to do the right thing and pay the attendant costs, or else its intervention will only make the situation worse for everyone involved, including itself. The tragedy is that given the U.S. political system's tendency to avoid decisive moves, the next administration will almost inevitably opt to muddle through. Given the extent of the chaos in the Middle East today, refusing to choose would likely prove to be the worst choice of all.

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Getting Over Egypt

Time to Rethink Relations

Michael Wahid Hanna

ASMAA WAGUIH / REUTERS

A protester shows his collection of tear gas canisters thrown by police forces during clashes between police and protesters near the Interior Ministry in Cairo, February 3, 2012.

For decades, the partnership between Egypt and the United States was a linchpin of the American role in the Middle East. Today, it is a mere vestige of a bygone era. There are no longer any compelling reasons for Washington to sustain especially close ties with Cairo. What was once a powerfully symbolic alliance with clear advantages for both sides has become a nakedly transactional relationship—and one that benefits the Egyptians more than the Americans. The time has

come for both sides to recognize that reality and for the United States to fundamentally alter its approach to Egypt: downgrading the priority it places on the relationship, reducing the level of economic and military support it offers Cairo, and more closely tying the aid it does deliver to political, military, and economic reforms that would make Egypt a more credible partner.

The contemporary U.S.-Egyptian relationship began in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and was shaped by the logic of the Cold War, with Egypt switching from the Soviet to the American camp in return for various kinds of support. During the quarter century since the end of the Cold War, other factors, such as cooperation in the Middle East peace process and the struggle against jihadist terrorism, provided new rationales for continuing the partnership. But at this point, after a popular uprising followed by an authoritarian relapse in Cairo, and with the peace process moribund and jihadism now a chronic condition, the U.S.-Egyptian relationship has become an anachronism that distorts American policy in the region.

This is not to say that the United States gets nothing out of the relationship. U.S. naval ships enjoy fast-track access to the Suez Canal (albeit with the payment of a hefty premium), and Egypt allows American military aircraft to fly over Egyptian airspace, both of which help Washington project power in the Middle East and manage its military deployments. Egypt also provides some diplomatic support for American regional policies and remains a potentially valuable partner in the fight against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS), to which militants in neighboring Libya and in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula have pledged allegiance. But such benefits do not justify the attention and resources that Washington lavishes on Egypt, which is scheduled to receive $1.3 billion in military aid and up to $150 million in economic assistance from the United States this year, making Egypt the

second-largest recipient of American largess. And even if Washington cut back its aid, Cairo would have plenty of reasons to continue its cooperation.

To be sure, the United States would profit greatly from close ties with a strong, prosperous Egypt that had a representative government and a capable military—a country that could act as an anchor for regional security and counterterrorist efforts, help contain Iran, and live up to its historical role as a leader of and model for the Arab world. But such an Egypt does not exist today and seems unlikely to emerge anytime soon. In the two years since leading a military coup, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has given little reason to hope that he can sustainably grow the country's economy or improve basic services and security. Meanwhile, he has cracked down on almost all forms of dissent and opposition. The Sisi regime has simply not provided a credible road map for Egypt's future.

> *There are no longer any compelling reasons for Washington to sustain especially close ties with Cairo.*

When Sisi removed Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, from office in July 2013, U.S. President Barack Obama refused to label the act a military coup, in part because that would have required, under U.S. law, immediately cutting off aid to Cairo. Still, in an interview with CNN the following month, Obama conceded that the relationship could not "return to business as usual." But for the most part, it has. Although Obama has ended Egypt's ability to obtain military hardware on credit and has placed new limits on how Egypt can spend the U.S. aid it receives, the United States will continue to supply Egypt with $1.3 billion every year for the foreseeable future, with very few strings attached. Last August, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Cairo to take part in the first "strategic

dialogue” that American officials have held with their Egyptian counterparts since 2009, announcing that the United States would soon resume joint military exercises with Egypt, which Obama suspended in 2013. As Kerry arrived, the U.S. embassy in Cairo publicly hailed the delivery of eight American-made F-16s to Egypt’s air force.

This tacit resumption of the pre-coup relationship has done little to enhance regional security, give the United States additional leverage, or curb Sisi’s autocratic tendencies. Meanwhile, it has implicated the United States in Egypt’s repression of Islamists, secular activists, and journalists who have dared to challenge or even merely criticize Sisi. And Washington has seen its relative influence in Cairo diminish even further, as wealthy Gulf states have flooded Egypt with an estimated $30 billion in various forms of economic assistance since Sisi took power.

The United States must sometimes make bargains with authoritarian regimes. And as extremist forces foment disorder and chaos in the Middle East, it might seem reasonable to mend fences with traditional allies in the region. However, for such compromises to be worth it, the strategic benefits must outweigh the costs, and Washington’s resumed embrace of Cairo does not pass that test. Continuing with the current policy would be a triumph of hope over experience. The United States should instead change course, scaling back the scope of its relationship with Egypt and reducing the exaggerated attention the country receives while placing stricter conditions on U.S. aid. Washington hardly needs to cut Cairo loose, but the United States should stop coddling it.

MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY / REUTERS

THERE WILL BE BLOOD: A MORSI SUPPORTER INJURED BY EGYPTIAN RIOT POLICE IN CAIRO, JULY, 2013.

THE THRILL IS GONE

The 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the Arab oil embargo of Israel's supporters that followed marked the beginning of a historic realignment of both the state system in the Middle East and Arab relations with the United States. That realignment was completed with the signing of the Camp David accords in 1978 and a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel the following year. U.S. President Jimmy Carter's pledges of sustained American economic and military aid to Egypt were a key factor in persuading Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat to make peace with Israel. The deal was a diplomatic masterstroke. It pulled Egypt into the U.S. orbit, eliminated the possibility of another large-scale conventional Arab-Israeli war (and thus the risk of great-power conflict in the region), and created a more stable and sustainable backdrop for international oil markets—and, by extension, the

global economy.

For the duration of the Cold War and during its immediate aftermath, U.S.-Egyptian security cooperation and coordination flourished, reaching a peak when Egypt participated in the multinational effort to liberate Kuwait after Iraq invaded in 1990. And with the advent of renewed Arab-Israeli peace efforts in the early 1990s, the U.S.-Egyptian relationship became even more valuable to Washington, as Egypt emerged as the Arab state most fully engaged in the process.

Meanwhile, at home, the authoritarian regime led by Sadat and then, after Sadat's 1981 assassination, his successor, Hosni Mubarak, entrenched itself. Over time, human rights advocates and Egyptian dissidents called for Washington to use its leverage to press Mubarak for reforms. But as the threat of jihadist terrorism grew, especially in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, U.S. officials decided not to push too hard, which could risk diminishing Egypt's cooperation on counterterrorism.

Then came the Arab uprisings, during which Mubarak was ousted in the wake of a broad-based popular mobilization. In 2012, a government dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood came to power through democratic elections, only to catastrophically overreach. That government, led by Morsi, ultimately fell to a putsch mounted by the military and the country's still powerful authoritarian security establishment—a coup that was supported by mass demonstrations against Morsi's rule and aided in no small part by the Muslim Brotherhood's intransigence in the face of public opposition to its agenda.

Obama pledged not to return to "business as usual." But for the most part, he has.

The result of all the turmoil, both in Egypt and the region at large, has been a far more organic alignment of Egyptian and Israeli interests than anything American diplomatic bribery could achieve. Indeed, some Egyptian and Israeli leaders boast that their relations with each other are now stronger than their ties to the United States. That might be hyperbole, but it is clear that U.S. aid is no longer the glue that binds the Egyptian-Israeli relationship, and it pales beside the amounts given to Cairo by the worried monarchies of the Gulf.

Egypt has an interest in pursuing counterterrorism for its own reasons, moreover, not simply out of a desire to curry favor with the United States, and its military is no longer a major factor in security issues beyond its borders. In short, the regional landscape has been transformed, and Egypt has been left behind. Despite its large population and historical importance, Egypt is no longer an influential regional player. Instead, it is a problem to be managed.

STICKS AND STONES

EVEN IN THE HEYDAY OF U.S.-EGYPTIAN COOPERATION, THE TWO COUNTRIES DID NOT SEE EYE TO EYE ON MANY ISSUES. BUT THE CURRENT GAP BETWEEN THEIR WORLDVIEWS AND PRIORITIES IS LARGER THAN AT ANY TIME IN THE PAST.

MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY / REUTERS

PROTESTERS DESTROY AN AMERICAN FLAG PULLED DOWN FROM THE U.S. EMBASSY IN CAIRO, SEPTEMBER 11, 2012.

Perhaps the most visceral expression of this phenomenon is the way in which anti-Americanism—always latent in Egyptian society, media, and politics—has exploded beyond its traditional boundaries to become a core feature of political discourse and official propaganda in Egypt. Throughout the Mubarak years, anti-Americanism was a common staple of regime-affiliated media. Such official and officially encouraged rhetoric served to inoculate the regime against a broad array of criticisms of its close relations with the Americans, particularly during the Bush-era “war on terror,” when the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the CIA’s use of torture, Washington’s indefinite detention of terrorist suspects in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and the United States’ unwavering support for Israel deepened public antipathy to the United

States. Criticism of the United States was pointed but stayed within clear boundaries.

> *The current gap between American and Egyptian worldviews and priorities is larger than at any time in the past.*

During Sisi's time in power, however, a categorically different kind of anti-Americanism—vitriolic, paranoid, and warped by conspiracy theories—has come to dominate Egyptian media. State-backed media outlets have published scurrilous, bizarre stories alleging extensive U.S. financial and diplomatic support for Sisi's Islamist opponents—not only the Muslim Brotherhood but even ISIS.

Not only does Sisi's regime tolerate such conspiracy theories, but elements of the security establishment even promote them as part of an attempt to sell Egypt as a regional bulwark against Washington's supposed goal of dividing and dominating the Arab world. Earlier this year, Vice Admiral Mohab Mamish, the former commander of the Egyptian navy and the current head of the Suez Canal Authority, told the Egyptian newspaper Al-Masry Al-Youm that during the 2011 uprising that toppled Mubarak, the Egyptian military thwarted a potential U.S. military intervention. Two U.S. frigates "were besieged by the navy and were forced to withdraw from [Egypt's] territorial waters," Mamish claimed. "It was important to show the Americans that the Egyptian military was highly diligent and prepared to deter any intervention," he explained.

Incendiary rhetoric such as this is particularly rankling given that many Egyptian military leaders, including Sisi himself, have received training at U.S. military institutions as participants in a program designed to increase the professionalism of the armed forces of American allies and partners. Yet this extensive, decades-long effort has not

produced the hoped-for doctrinal or structural shifts within the Egyptian armed forces nor increased the competence of Egypt's military leadership. As a result, there is not much close cooperation, confidence, or trust between the two militaries. This gap is so large now that the United States has made no effort to include Egypt in an operational role in the U.S.-led anti-ISIS military campaign, despite the obvious need for Arab military partners.

ASMAA WAGUIH / REUTERS

A poster of army chief Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi with a banner reading "Revolution needs power" as protesters gathered for a mass protest to support the army in Tahrir square in Cairo, July, 2013.

Indeed, when it comes to fighting Islamist extremists, even some members of the U.S. defense establishment have come to see Egypt's repressive tactics as counterproductive, since they tend to further radicalize militants and undermine international efforts to curb militancy in the region. The United States remains concerned about the real and serious

terrorist threats Egypt faces, including the risk that formerly non-violent Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which renounced its historical use of violence decades ago, could reverse course or splinter, with breakaway factions turning to terrorism and antistate violence. But the Sisi regime has demonstrated a dangerous inability or unwillingness to differentiate between Islamist actors, lumping together the hitherto generally nonviolent members of the Muslim Brotherhood with the brutal extremists of ISIS. The mainstreaming of regressive and sectarian ideologies such as the Brotherhood's would hardly serve U.S. interests. But the United States rightly sees Sisi's forceful repression of all opposition as a destabilizing factor for the region and a boost to the radicalizing efforts of militants.

MANAGEABLE RISKS

Although the acrimony and strains in the U.S.-Egyptian relationship are on full display, U.S. officials are understandably wary of making dramatic changes to long-standing U.S. policies in the Arab world, particularly at a moment of regional disorder and instability. Many in Washington share well-founded concerns about the potential destabilizing effect of political violence in Egypt; some even worry about the more remote possibility of state failure. But such fears are built on overestimations of Washington's impact on Egyptian politics. Egyptian leaders have consistently rejected U.S. advice throughout the post-Mubarak period, and a restructuring of bilateral ties is unlikely to have a significant effect on Egypt's internal stability.

Some proponents of maintaining the status quo argue that a U.S. shift away from Egypt would further alienate influential American allies in the Arab world, many of which are dispirited by Washington's limited engagement in the Syrian civil war and troubled by the Obama administration's push for the Iranian nuclear deal. This is a legitimate concern, but the

fallout could be contained in much the same way that the United States assuaged Arab allies uneasy about the nuclear deal with Iran: by increasing direct U.S. security cooperation with Arab states.

> *Regional turmoil has produced a more organic alignment of Egyptian and Israeli interests than anything American diplomatic bribery could achieve.*

Other advocates for continuing on the present path claim that Sisi is a different kind of Egyptian leader, more willing to confront the problem of Islamist extremism and more focused on the need for real economic reform. They point to his calls for a “religious revolution” to combat extremism within Islam and were encouraged when Sisi remarked that it is “inconceivable that the thought that [Egyptians] hold most sacred should cause the entire nation to be a source of anxiety, danger, killing, and destruction for the rest of the world.” Those words were notable, but they served mostly to highlight Egypt’s tragedy: the country and the region as a whole are in desperate need of alternatives to the regressive and sectarian vision of most of the Arab world’s Islamists. But by yoking the call for reform to repression, authoritarianism, and hypernationalism, Sisi is merely repeating the mistakes of his predecessors, stoking the very radicalism he seeks to eliminate. As for the economy, the highest priority for the regime, Sisi lacks credible plans for development that would create equitable growth.

The most powerful arguments against restructuring the relationship are based on the fear that a spurned Egypt would stop cooperating with the U.S. military and thus stymie Washington’s ability to project power in the region. According to multiple U.S. officials, in recent years, when Cairo has sought to express its displeasure with Washington, it has delayed granting permission for U.S. aircraft to fly over

Egyptian airspace, temporarily complicating American military planning and logistics. In light of the ongoing and open-ended U.S. campaign against ISIS, such delays have panicked Pentagon planners, who are accustomed to preferential treatment. But although Sisi's regime might be willing to occasionally push back against U.S. demands for access, Egypt can't afford to be too aggressive, since doing so angers not just the Americans but also the Gulf states that have become Egypt's main patrons—and that are counting on U.S. military power to not only protect the region from ISIS but also serve as their overall security guarantor. The governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will not sit idly by if Egypt drags its feet on U.S. requests for logistical support and endangers the mechanisms that ensure Gulf security, and Sisi cannot afford to unduly antagonize them; as Sisi himself has stated, the security of the Gulf states is an "integral part of Egyptian national security."

TIME FOR A CHANGE

FOR THE UNITED STATES, MILITARY AID TO EGYPT HAS LONG BEEN UNDERSTOOD AS THE CENTRAL PILLAR OF A BROAD AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ARAB WORLD'S MOST POPULOUS NATION—A MEANS OF LEVERAGE AND A SOURCE OF INFLUENCE OVER NOT ONLY THE EGYPTIAN MILITARY BUT ALSO THE BROADER CONTOURS OF EGYPTIAN POLITICAL LIFE. BUT IN REALITY, U.S. AID HAS NOT BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN PRODUCING A PROFESSIONALIZED AND EFFECTIVE EGYPTIAN MILITARY. NOR HAS IT ENCOURAGED EGYPTIAN LEADERS TO SHARE WASHINGTON'S WORLDVIEW OR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES. AND IT CERTAINLY HAS NOT HAD A PARTICULARLY POSITIVE EFFECT ON THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL TRAJECTORY: FOREIGN MILITARY FUNDING HAS PROVED WHOLLY INEFFECTIVE IN PUSHING EGYPT TOWARD DEMOCRATIC REFORM.

In the future, therefore, American aid should be tightly focused on assisting the modernization and professionalization of the Egyptian military and should be made wholly contingent on evidence that Egypt takes those matters seriously. In March, the Obama administration

announced that Egypt’s future purchases of U.S. military hardware must be specifically tied to counterterrorism, protecting Egypt’s borders, combating militants in the Sinai, or maritime security. But it remains unclear how the United States will determine whether any prospective purchase meets the new criteria.

Washington should make it perfectly clear that its military aid is not connected to a push for Egypt to embrace political reforms, much less democratize. Targeting the aid more narrowly and focusing it on clear and relatively modest goals will allow Washington to significantly reduce the overall amount of military financing it provides to Cairo. The level of aid should accurately reflect the current importance of the bilateral relationship, which now ranks far below U.S. relations with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Lowering the total annual amount from $1.3 billion to around $500 million would express U.S. displeasure with the status quo while adequately serving the near-term security needs of the United States, continuing to signal an American commitment to Egypt, and conferring a certain level of political status on the Egyptian government and military.

Such a reduction would not threaten the training and technology transfers the Egyptian military values, nor would it harm intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries, which would continue on the basis of mutual necessity. To cushion the blow to U.S. arms manufacturers that such a change would entail, the United States should consider diverting future military assistance to more reliable allies, such as Jordan; or to partners that need help far more urgently than Egypt, such as Iraq; or to states in the region that are transitioning to democracy more successfully, such as Tunisia.

But the United States should leave open the possibility that

aid to Egypt could be restored to previous levels if Egypt undertakes serious political liberalization, begins credible efforts at inclusive and sustainable economic change, and initiates a program of genuine military modernization. Such reforms would justify a strategic U.S.-Egyptian relationship and enhance regional security and could serve as the foundation for a stable, democratic, pluralistic, and prosperous Egypt that would provide the Arab world with a much-needed alternative to its failed political models.

It is hard to imagine Egypt taking any of those steps in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, if Washington decides to proceed with an outdated approach to Cairo, the result will be constant tension, friction, and frustration, as both sides' expectations go unfulfilled. "Business as usual" will do nothing to alter Egypt's negative trajectory and will further bind the United States to an unreliable partner.

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The Next Front Against ISIS

The Right Way to Intervene in Libya

Frederic Wehrey and Wolfram Lacher

REUTERS

Smoke from an oil fire in Es Sider, in Ras Lanuf, Libya, January 6, 2016. Firefighters have extinguished two fires at oil storage tanks at Libya's Ras Lanuf terminal, but blazes continue at five tanks in the nearby port of Es Sider after attacks this week by ISIS militants.

In recent weeks, a succession of U.S. and European officials have warned that military operations to stop the creeping advance of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the shattered North African state of Libya are imminent. Since the summer of 2014, ISIS has exploited a governance vacuum and a factional civil war in Libya to expand what was once just a toehold into a foothold. It has clashed with, and in some areas displaced, older jihadist groups affiliated with al Qaeda. It has

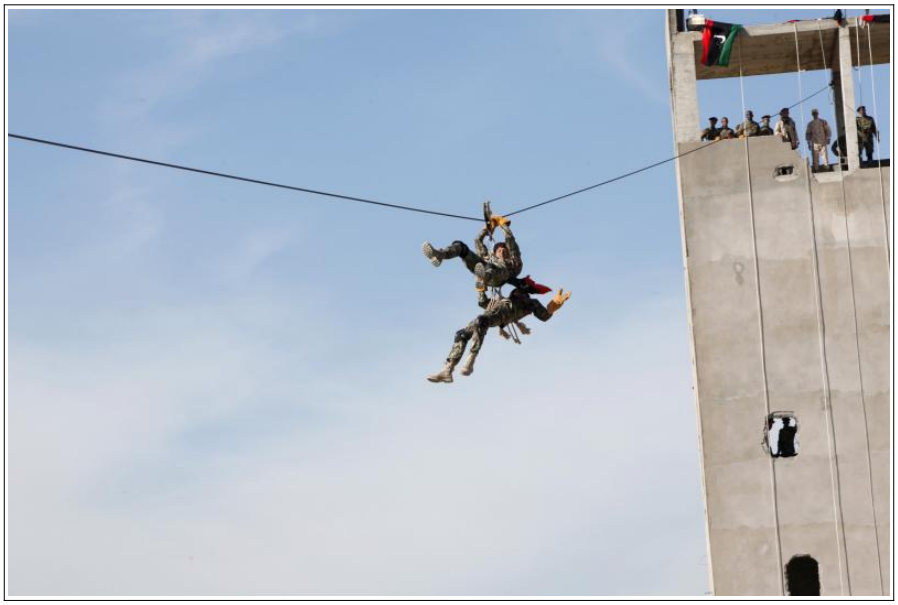
used Libya's lawlessness to attract foreign recruits, conduct training, and plot operations abroad. ISIS now controls the central coastal city of Sirte and is attacking the nearby petroleum facilities to prevent much-needed revenue from reaching Libya's central bank. And perhaps most worrisome, U.S. officials recently stated that ISIS has sent hundreds of fighters from Iraq and Syria to Libya in a calculated fallback strategy; the total number ISIS fighters in Libya is estimated between 3,000 and 6,500.

There's no doubt that the ISIS presence demands a forcible response, above all from Libyans themselves, backed by Western support. That assistance is likely to involve special operations forces—who are reportedly already on the ground—liaising with, training, and advising Libyan units, backed by aircraft using precision-guided munitions. But this approach carries great risks. The West must proceed carefully, or else it could exacerbate Libya's political fractures, encourage warlordism, or undermine attempts to re-establish a single government and lay the basis for a cohesive and civilian-controlled military. Any strategy to tackle ISIS should first aim at bridging Libyan political divides and channeling assistance in a way that promotes cooperation between rival forces.

LIBYA'S FAILED STATE

For Libyans and Western governments alike, the biggest obstacle to confronting ISIS is Libya's broken state. For the past year and half, the country has been split into two loose constellations of political factions and armed actors. The first is the Tripoli-based "Dawn" coalition, which comprises Islamist fighters and militias from the western part of the country. The second is the "Dignity" umbrella, which is drawn from eastern tribes, federalists, some western militias, and Qaddafi-era officers recruited into a self-styled "Libyan National Army" led by General Khalifa Hifter. In the past

year, internal power struggles have fractured these two groups to the point that they exist only in name. Worse, both have been so focused on preventing rivals from gaining ground that they've allowed ISIS to expand, often cynically using the terrorist group's presence to accuse their adversaries of collusion.



ISMAIL ZITOUNY / REUTERS

Libyan Army soldiers demonstrate their skills during a military graduation parade in Tripoli, December 24, 2015.

Representatives from the two sides recently signed a UN-brokered agreement to form a unity government, which, Western officials hope, will soon issue a formal invitation for military assistance. But the unity agreement is fragile and incomplete, having been pushed through under Western pressure despite resistance from key local players. The Presidency Council, the nine-member executive body established by the agreement, has started to falter before even having managed to form a government. Unless it can obtain the formal support of Libya's two rival legislatures and take office in the capital, Tripoli, the unity government will be

widely perceived as a Western puppet.

Even if the Presidency Council does overcome the initial hurdles, moreover, it will quickly face the daunting task of re-establishing centralized military command and building loyal, integrated units out of a collection of disparate armed factions. A key stumbling block is Hifter's continued presence as commander in chief of the Libyan National Army. The Dawn bloc insists that he go; the Dignity faction's failure to remove him gives fuel to rejectionists in the rival camp and precludes the creation of a single chain of command under the new government. The loose alliance that Hifter leads is itself rife with personal and factional rivalries: The majority of his forces in Benghazi are not uniformed army troops but irregular neighborhood and tribal militias. Meanwhile prominent army officers on the frontlines are themselves rivals of Hifter.

Planning in Western capitals appears ignorant of these challenges. Two options are currently on the table: a training program to stand up new army units loyal to the government and a counterterrorism effort focused on providing assistance to those forces on the ground that are most capable and most willing to confront ISIS. Neither option offers a remedy to the problem of factionalism in Libya's security sector—and both could make matters worse.

The training program is based on the flawed premise that Libya lacks skilled fighters. In fact, it has lacked governments capable of bringing skilled fighters under state control. A Western training effort in 2013–14 to build a national army—the so-called general purpose force—failed because there were no national structures for recruits to join: rival political interests in Libya's state institutions had turned the security sector into a hodge-podge of factional militias. Another training program risks simply repeating this error unless the Presidency Council can agree on a realistic

roadmap for building a unified and professional military. In the best-case scenario, such efforts would result in a reliable military for future governments to use. But it would not offer an immediate response to the urgent ISIS threat.

ZOUBEIR SOUISSI / REUTERS

A general view of a trench that forms part of a barrier along the frontier with Libya, is seen in Sabkeht Alyun, Tunisia February 6, 2016. Tunisia has completed a 125 mile barrier along its frontier with Libya to try to keep out Islamist militants.

In the meantime, Western governments will seek to back existing forces against ISIS. And that is where the problem lies. By liaising with and assisting armed groups against ISIS, Western special operations could empower factional rivals and reduce the incentives for political reconciliation. A previous counterterrorism assistance program is instructive in this regard. U.S. counterterrorism training from 2012–13 was focused on the 22nd Libyan Special Operations Battalion, a unit that, by its commander’s own admission, was narrowly drawn from certain Western mountain cities and whose definition of terrorist ended up including its own rivals.

In addition, navigating the patchwork of competing militia claims will be a daunting challenge. In setting up a physical presence on the turf of a particular faction, Western special operations forces could create the impression of partisanship, causing rivals to seek out counterbalancing alliances. This risk of blowback is especially dire in Sirte. The most powerful militias equipped to liberate Sirte from ISIS control are from the nearby coastal city of Misrata. But an explicit U.S. and European partnership with Misrata would antagonize Sirte's population, which in 2011 suffered abuses when Misratan militias overran the territory. By the same token, simultaneous Western support to militias to the east of Sirte, such as the Petroleum Facilities Guard under Ibrahim Jadran, could end with those militias turning their guns on their Misratan rivals in a scramble for the region's oil resources.

Western intervention, particularly airstrikes, could set in motion other unintended consequences as well. A sustained campaign of Western airstrikes and the visible presence of Western troops could threaten the fragile basis on which the new unity government relies. Such interventions would hand new ammunition to spoilers and rejectionists, who will accuse the new government of surrendering Libya's sovereignty. Likewise, ISIS and al Qaeda would gain new grist for their propaganda mills. In fact, Western expectations that the new unity government will request foreign assistance are likely overstated—precisely because the government must understand the dangers.

REUTERS

Smoke from an oil fire in Es Sider, in Ras Lanuf, Libya, January 6, 2016. Firefighters have extinguished two fires at oil storage tanks at Libya's Ras Lanuf terminal, but blazes continue at five tanks in the nearby port of Es Sider after attacks this week by ISIS militants.

THE RIGHT WAY TO INTERVENE

Counterterrorism assistance must proceed hand-in-hand with building inclusive political and security institutions. The two should be mutually reinforcing. Instead of a training mission or a direct intervention in the form of airstrikes, the West’s priority should be to support the establishment of integrated structures and units in the security sector. At the political level, that will require intensive engagement to overcome the standoff over the army leadership and promote cooperation between representatives of rival factions in the Presidency Council, its government, and the military command.

On the ground, the West must tie assistance for the fight against ISIS to a process of integration of armed groups. To be eligible to receive counterterrorism support, for example, armed groups should accept the unity government and

subordinate themselves to its national command structure. But that won’t be enough. To avoid empowering individual factions and fuelling factional conflict, Western military assistance must also include the establishment of coordinating mechanisms between Libyan military forces on the ground. These could include joint command centers between militias on a regional basis, with the aim of gradually creating integrated command structures and, eventually, dissolving local factions into integrated army units. Western advisors should encourage militias from Misrata, Ajdabiya, and southern Libya, for example, to cooperate with army officers from Sirte to lead the offensive against ISIS in the city.

Regional command centers would be staffed by local army officers, militia commanders, and foreign special operations advisers who would facilitate the transfer of intelligence, de-conflict ground movements with airstrikes, and, perhaps most importantly, act as neutral political arbiters. For such assistance to work, Western states—France, the United Kingdom, and the United States—will need to coordinate their efforts closely. They will also need to ensure that regional military forces from Egypt, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates support this strategy and do not attempt to set up parallel advisory and assistance channels—these states’ previous meddling has been deeply partisan and unhelpful in both combating ISIS and resolving Libya’s civil conflict.

Above all, Western involvement in Libya should be geared toward supporting the unity government, which will need to back any efforts to promote battlefield coordination among regional militias. No single faction should receive assistance unless it is considered both neutral in local power struggles and loyal to the unity government. Further, if the government makes progress on re-unifying command structures, Western assistance should flow through a national chain of command, rather than directly to regional coordination centers. Of

course, if the council remains paralyzed by internal divisions or the agreement collapses, the Western backed regional coordination centers will have no chance of ever evolving into a foundation for an integrated military. At the very least, however, the strategy will reduce the risk that military assistance will widen political rifts and contribute to the failure of the unity government.

Alarmist assessments of ISIS in Libya should not lead to a hasty and heavy-handed intervention. ISIS may be expanding its presence in Libya, but it has not been able tap into the popular discontent of broad segments of the population—yet. Unlike in Iraq or Syria, ISIS cannot prey on sectarian fears. It has not shown an ability to set up durable governance structures in areas it controls. Libya still has multiple societal and political actors capable of and willing to fight back against the group. The Western approach should work carefully to ensure that it harnesses and unifies them rather than dividing them.

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Algeria After the Arab Spring

Algiers Came Out Ahead—But the Good Times Could Be Over

Yahia H. Zoubir

REUTERS

Algerians chant and dance while holding rifles at the opening of an event at Algiers, June 4, 2006.

In early 2011, most pundits expected that Algeria—plagued by corruption, nepotism, deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, restricted freedoms, housing shortages, and bad governance—would be the next country to face an Arab Spring uprising. And although riots did shake the country, they were contained swiftly (and without bloodshed) by a

large, well trained, well equipped, and well paid police force.

To this day, sporadic and localized strikes, protests, and riots are routine. There are sometimes as many as 500 a month. But, generally speaking, the regime has been able to address them through payoffs in the form of higher salaries or housing vouchers. Protests, in other words, are kept localized and opposition groups have little popular support. Besides, many of them have been co-opted by the government, with leaders of most of the opposition parties having participated in one way or another in successive governments.

Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been able to succeed in co-opting the public and the opposition where other governments in the region have failed because Algerians still remember the brutal conflict throughout the 1990s, when government forces faced off against various Islamist groups. The Islamic Salvation Front had been poised to win the 1992 legislative elections, which were abruptly cancelled, provoking widespread violence. Likewise, the government still has plenty of cash from oil and gas reserves to buy loyalty. The only question, though, is whether the regime’s resilience will last in the face of new challenges.

RAMZI BOUDINA / REUTERS

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika looks on during a swearing-in ceremony in Algiers, April 28, 2014.

THE PROBLEM OF SUCCESSION

After watching Tunisian dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali flee his country in January 2011, Bouteflika promised that he would introduce reforms aimed at what he termed “deepening the democratic process” in Algeria. He lifted the state of emergency that had been in place since 1992 and presented in April of that year a roadmap for reform. It included unspecific promises to amend the constitution and revise the laws governing elections, political parties and associations, women’s participation in public life, and the media.

The reform package, including the bill on women's political representation, was approved in August 2011 by the cabinet, which was dominated by Bouteflika’s National Liberation Front. The bill then passed congress. Soon after, Bouteflika called legislative and municipal elections, and authorized scores of small opposition parties after years of lockdown.

Because the opposition was so atomized, the National Liberation Front and its allies won easily. From the regime's perspective, then, the vote handed Bouteflika a public mandate to pursue his own preferred democratization process—one that is gradual and is ostensibly not imposed by foreign powers.

In reality, Bouteflika has used the period since then to consolidate his power. In spite of his poor health (he suffered a stroke in April 2013), Bouteflika was re-elected for a fourth term in April 2014, campaigning through proxies since he cannot walk or give speeches. Through his powerful brother Saïd Bouteflika, who is part of the so-call presidential clan that runs the country, the president forced the retirement, in November 2015, of the head of intelligence Mohamed "Toufik" Mediène. They replaced him with Toufik's closest associate, Athmane "Bachir" Tartag. The government also dissolved the quasi-autonomous bureau over which Toufik had presided and replaced it in January 2016 with an even more powerful agency, the Direction des Services de Sécurité, which reports to the president and has some functions within the military.

The Bouteflikas were able to push through these changes by exploiting divisions within the military over the role of intelligence services and the leadership of the Armed Forces. The regime argues that restructuring the military and intelligence services is proof that the state is evolving and reforming; under this system, the military and the intelligence services will no longer be the backbone of the political system; rather, they will be a professional institution operating within a civilian state. Bouteflika's claims are dubious, though, since the new constitution, which was approved with no opposition by parliament on February 7, 2016, does not offer such direction. In fact, even if the military's prerogatives are constitutionally limited to national defense and protection of the territory's integrity, it will

remain the cornerstone of the Algerian state after Bouteflika is gone.

The latest constitution limits the number of presidential terms to two. But the main problem in Algeria is not the constitution—there have been plenty of those since independence in 1962—but that the laws are not respected. Debating the merits of a particular bill or revision is thus futile. The real question nowadays is who will succeed Bouteflika. Rumors abound, but given the opacity of the political system, it isn't wise to make predictions (Bouteflika even refused to introduce into the new constitution the position of a vice-president who could have succeeded him in case of severe illness or death). It is likely that competing groups at the heights of power will try to find a consensus pick who will accommodate the interests they have accumulated under Bouteflika's rule. At this stage, it doesn't seem like they have found that person, but should rumors that Bouteflika's brother will succeed him prove credible, the transition will be fraught and complicated. Saïd would not have risen to power without his brother's help. He is accountable to no one but himself and is responsible for creating what outspoken opposition leaders call "the oligarchy."

ECONOMIC BREAKDOWN

Revenue from hydrocarbons account for about 60 percent of Algeria's GDP and 97 percent of foreign earnings. When the proceeds from oil and gas sales were high, the government could buy social peace. It could also invest heavily in infrastructure. Although such projects contributed to much-needed new housing and other infrastructure, they also resulted in the creation of a new and corrupt business class.

The fall in the price of oil has worried the regime—and the new business caste whose survival is dependent on

government contracts. So far, the regime has relied on the $200 billion in reserves that it accumulated when the price of oil was high. After just two years of spending, today, this account is down by half. There is just enough left to cover about two more years of imports.

ZOHRA BENSEMRA / REUTERS

Honor guards at the Presidential Palace in Algiers, April 16, 2012.

In December 2015, the government passed the 2016 Finance Law to address the economic crisis. The law, which introduced some austerity measures, is controversial because the government failed to address the issue of subsidies on basic staples, medical care, and housing. Undoubtedly, officials fear that the removal of subsidies could rally a quiet opposition. But the situation is so dire that the government needs to take seriously the possibility of phasing out the subsidies while providing cash to needy Algerians instead. Algiers may now have to resort, albeit reluctantly, to borrowing in international markets.

In short, the regime’s unwillingness all these years to

transform a rentier economy into a productive one has come back to haunt it in exactly the way experts would predict. The government has no other choice but to cut budgets, increase the prices of some goods, and reduce imports. The challenges are made even worse by other factors, particularly corruption. Indeed, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2015 ranks Algeria in 88th place out of 167 countries, and the World Bank's Doing Business 2016 puts Algeria at 163 out of 189.

INSECURE

Algeria shares borders with Libya in the east and Mali in the south. Spillover from both countries, which are wracked by war, is the main threat to Algeria's continued stability. The country has already deployed 75,000 troops to those borders. There, Algeria's security forces have proved quite adept at combating terrorism. In December 2014, they took out a jihadist cell, Jund al-Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate), based in northern Algeria, that had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS). They have also prevented al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) from threatening the regime.

Even as officials pay lip service to the idea that the wars in the Middle East are a ploy orchestrated by Western powers to destabilize the region, the government has continued to deepen the bilateral security ties it has built with EU countries and the United States since 9/11. For example, Algeria provided logistical support to France during France's intervention in northern Mali in January 2013. It also shares valuable counterterrorism intelligence with Western counterparts. Although Algeria doesn't receive military assistance from Western countries, its hydrocarbon revenue has enabled it to revamp its military equipment. It purchases billions of dollars' worth of sophisticated hardware from Russia, its traditional supplier, but also from France, Italy, Germany, and the United States.

For all that, the conflicts in Libya and Mali have caused great concern to the authorities in Algeria; in fact, the recent restructuring of the intelligence services can be partially attributed to such worries. Improved coordination among the various branches of intelligence as well as with the military forces is meant to better prepare the security forces for the potential spillover of the conflict in Libya. Algerians are truly concerned that a new Western intervention in Libya, which seems increasingly plausible, will spell disaster for the North Africa region as thousands of refugees flee the violence. The authorities have made clear their opposition to such intervention, but Algeria's voice is no longer what it used to be on the international scene, not least because of the uncertainties generated by Bouteflika's quasi paralysis and the doubts as to who has been ruling Algeria.

SPRINGTIME

Five years after the Arab Spring, Algeria, Africa's biggest country, has maintained some semblance of stability. The absence of Bouteflika for eight months to receive treatment in France following his stroke in 2013 did not threaten his regime. If anything, Bouteflika returned with a vengeance; although partially incapacitated, failing to address his people since 2012, and rarely appearing on television, he managed to remove some of his most potent opponents and consolidate his dictatorial rule. Oil and gas revenue—and abundant rain—have provided him with the resources to keep social peace, and he has succeeded in co-opting friends and foes through a redistribution of the gifts from nature.

But oil prices keep falling, and Bouteflika won't last forever. In other words, Algeria could soon be facing a Spring of its own.

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African Politics: Change and Continuity (Routledge, 2016).

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Ankara's Failure

How Turkey Lost the Arab Spring

Jonathan Schanzer and Merve Tahiroglu

UMIT BEKTAS / REUTERS

A demonstrator waves Turkey's national flag as he sits on a monument during a protest against Turkey's Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling AKP in central Ankara, June 2, 2013.

Read the Turkish version.

When anti-government protests spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, and Syria five years ago, optimists declared that the Middle East was on the precipice of a dramatic democratic transformation. Among the most optimistic were the leaders of Turkey, who saw the upheaval as an opportunity to realize their neo-Ottoman dream of positioning Turkey, a Muslim democracy with close ties to both the West and Arab nations, as a regional leader. Five years later, Arab Spring optimism

has collapsed, and with it, Turkish ambitions. Libya and Syria are caught in civil wars, Egypt grows increasingly authoritarian, and Tunisia—arguably the only success story among them—is a magnet for the Islamic State (ISIS). Turkey, meanwhile, has experienced its own rapid reversal of fortune. Rather than projecting influence, Ankara is more isolated than ever.

Years before the Arab Spring erupted, back in 2002, Turkey's Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) sought to establish better ties with the Middle East. Ankara adopted what it called a "zero problems with neighbors" policy, which involved new diplomatic and economic initiatives with all of its neighbors, including countries where Turkey had faced troubles in the past, such as Iran and Syria, and even established deeper ties with countries in Africa, such as Somalia. But President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the founder of the AKP, and Ahmet Davutoglu, his foreign minister (now prime minister), had more in mind than settling old scores and boosting trade. Rather, they aspired to revive the regional supremacy of the once all-powerful Ottoman Empire, striving to become the leaders of a pan-Islamic movement in the Middle East—just as the Ottoman caliphs did until the twentieth century.

MURAD SEZER / REUTERS

Supporters of Egypt's deposed Islamist President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood wave Turkish and Egyptian flags during a rally in protest violence in Egypt, in Istanbul, August 17, 2013.

The Arab Spring, as they saw it, provided a golden opportunity to realize this dream. As early as September 2011, Erdogan toured Libya and Egypt, unabashedly positioning his AKP government as the model for all of the Arab world's transitioning countries, and himself as the leader of that movement. Erdogan called for democracy and stressed the compatibility of Islam and secular governance. With optimism surging as dictator after dictator fell, Erdogan became a rockstar of sorts for those seeking a soft landing for the Arab Spring.

For its part, the West not only accepted Erdogan's quest for regional leadership, but also appeared to encourage it. A growing herd of Western media and scholars pointed to Turkey as the paragon of Western-oriented Muslim-majority democracy for the region, and to the AKP as an Islamist-rooted but reformed and secular party. With his Middle East policy hedged on a pivot to Asia and a withdrawal from conflict with violent Islamist groups, U.S. President Barack

Obama was more than happy to have a partner like Erdogan, whom he effectively anointed to manage the region's transformation. The two leaders spoke regularly by phone, and all appeared to be going according to plan.

FALSE ADVERTISING

Erdogan's strategy was not as advertised. Far from championing pluralism and protection of civil liberties in the region, Erdogan opted to champion the chauvinistic style of political Islam primarily associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. With its own roots associated with the movement, it was a natural evolution for the AKP. Indeed, Erdogan had already built closer ties with many of the regional Muslim Brotherhood movements over the years, perhaps best exemplified by his close and personal relationship the leadership of the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas, itself a splinter of the Brotherhood. Ankara also teamed up with Qatar, a longtime sponsor of Brotherhood movements region-wide that is viewed by many of its Gulf Arab neighbors as dangerously provocative in this regard.

HANNIBAL HANSCHKE / REUTERS

Kurdish protestors stage a rally outside the Chancellery in Berlin, Germany, January 22, 2016, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu listen to national anthems.

The AKP's support for the Brotherhood was clear in Tunisia and Libya, but was arguably most evident in Egypt. Erdogan enjoyed widespread popularity among the Egyptian Ikwan soon after the revolution, not least for his firm support for Palestinians and his outward hostility toward Israel. With the Brotherhood set to inherit the mantle of power in Egypt, Ankara quickly committed to helping strengthen Egypt's economy through investment, aid, and trade. When the Brotherhood-affiliated Mohamed Morsi did become president, Davutoglu solidified Turkey's economic support, pledging nearly $2 billion in aid to the new government in Cairo in September 2012. A month later, Morsi had already become an honorary guest at the AKP's annual convention in Ankara. Erdogan met Morsi several times throughout his one-year stint in office, advising the Brotherhood leader on a wide range of issues from governance and economics.

Ankara's assistance to the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria was more covert than in Egypt, but no less significant. The Baathist Syrian regime had banned the Muslim Brotherhood's activities in the 1960s and exiled the group in 1982. Even before the uprising against President Bashar al Assad erupted in 2011, the AKP pushed for a Damascus–Brotherhood reconciliation. But its real support to the organization came after the revolution began. Although the Brotherhood was largely irrelevant to the Syrian revolution in its early stages, Ankara propelled the group to the top echelons of nearly all the opposition groups that organized in Turkey, including the Free Syrian Army.

> *Whatever Turkey's new policies bring, Erdogan's Arab Spring legacy is written.*

POOR PAYOFFS

As is now clear, though, Turkey’s bets failed to pay off. Morsi faced massive protests in Egypt and, within a year of his election, was ousted by secular military forces in July 2013. Ankara and Cairo have had no diplomatic relations ever since. Tunisians democratically replaced their Islamist-led government the next year. Syria and Libya are still embroiled in bloody civil wars, and Turkey’s contribution to the Islamist factions in these conflicts has provoked the ire of Western countries and some of the Sunni Gulf Arab states that seek to weaken the Brotherhood and strengthen the power of the monarchies.

Ankara is not solely responsible for the failure of the Arab Spring. Indeed, the autocratic forces that feared the rise of the Brotherhood played an outsized role in that. But Turkey’s full support for the Brotherhood, as opposed to a commitment to pluralism, rule of law, and other democratic values, helped fuel the anxiety that led to the counter-revolutions. The promise of a moderate Islamist rule in the Middle East now appears a far-fetched dream. And Ankara’s hegemonic ambitions have failed along with it. Turkey is now isolated in a neighborhood filled with autocracies that deem it an enemy, and civil wars in which Turkey is seen as having fanned the flames.

ABDALRHMAN ISMAIL / REUTERS

Displaced children, who fled with their families the violence from Islamic State-controlled area of al-Bab, wait as they are stuck in the Syrian village of Akda to cross into Turkey, January 23, 2016.

With its neo-Ottoman aspirations dashed and scant opportunities for regional gain, Ankara still supports the Brotherhood's various movements across the Middle East, even after their fall from grace. Turkey is widely believed to still be providing covert support to Islamist fighters in Syria and Libya and many Egyptian Brotherhood fugitives escaped to Turkey after the coup. Global Muslim Brotherhood leaders have held several conferences in Istanbul and Ankara. Hamas still maintains a headquarters in Turkey, too. Indeed, Turkey has emerged a safe haven for the Brotherhood and its affiliated groups, and its alliance with fellow brotherhood patron Qatar is still strong. The two countries recently agreed on visa-free travel for their citizens and conducted their first joint military drill. Turkey is now taking that friendship one step further by planning a military base in Qatar—its first in the Middle East.

Its dream of an ascendant Brotherhood might be gone if not forgotten, but Ankara has adopted other policies that demonstrate the AKP maintains its appetite for risk. In November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet thus prompting a diplomatic crisis with Moscow. The following month, Ankara sent troops into northern Iraq, ostensibly to assist the Kurds and Sunni Iraqis in their fight against ISIS, much to the fury of the Baghdad government. Turkey's relationship with Iran is also strained, since the two sides support opposing camps in Syria and blame each other for fueling sectarianism in the region. To Tehran's dismay, Turkey joined the Saudi-led anti-Houthi coalition in Yemen, even if its participation is nominal. Meanwhile, even though Turkey is officially part of the U.S.-led coalition to fight ISIS, the United States and other European countries continue to criticize Ankara for not doing enough to curb the flow of extremist fighters across its border with Syria.

Whatever Turkey's new policies bring, Erdogan's Arab Spring legacy is written. He claimed to champion a synthesis of Islamism and pluralism, but he promoted another brand of Islamism entirely. This was evident among the Brotherhood branches he sought to empower, and also at home, where civil liberties and democracy have suffered. In that, he has done perhaps insurmountable harm to the very ideas he once professed.

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Assad Has It His Way

The Peace Talks and After

Joshua Landis and Steven Simon

OMAR SANADIKI / REUTERS

Syrian civilians who volunteered to join local Self Protection Units to protect their neighborhoods alongside the Syrian army attend training in Damascus countryside, Syria December 5, 2015. The text on the badges read in Arabic, "the soldiers of al-Assad" and "The protectors of homes."

President Bashar al-Assad is winning in Syria. Russia has shifted the balance of power there dramatically. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and the UN might insist that Assad negotiate with his opponents and ultimately cede power to them, but the Syrian president has no intention of accepting such demands. His advisers state that he will go to talks in Geneva this month “to listen, but not to negotiate.” In other words, he is still out for victory on the battlefield. As the

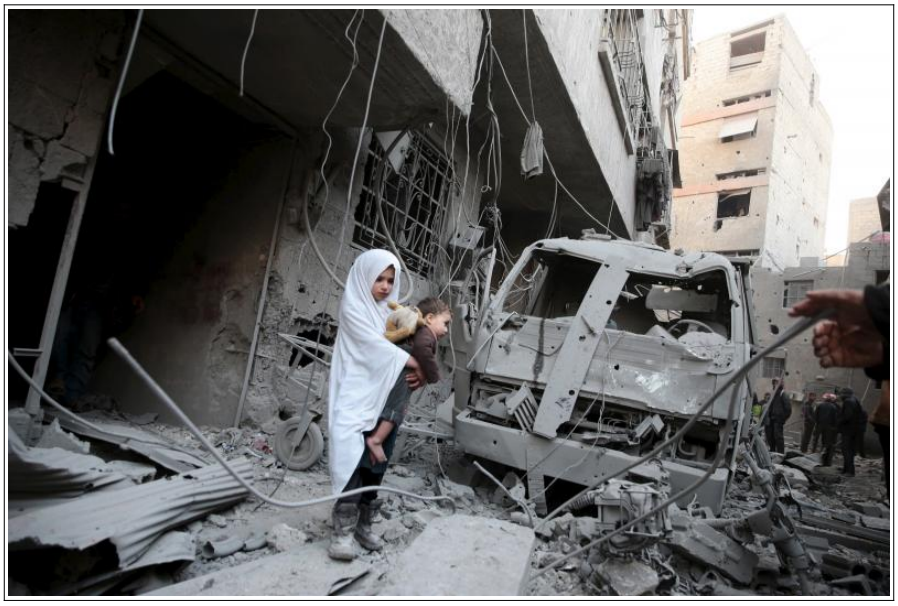
United States enters the now delayed UN negotiating process, it will have to stay flexible in its expectations and objectives in light of the shifting military balance on the ground.

The main reason for Assad's renewed confidence is a clear reversal of military fortune. Three months ago, Assad's army was beleaguered. A large confederation of jihadist and Islamist militias calling themselves the Victory Army had achieved something resembling unity. Built around Syria's two strongest militias—al-Nusra, al Qaeda's Syria franchise; and Ahrar al-Sham, the most powerful Salafi militia in the country—the Victory Army conquered two strategic northern cities, Idlib and Jisr al-Shughour, in quick succession this spring. These victories attracted many other militias into their orbit and promised success. The expulsion of regime forces from Jisr al-Shughour not only meant the independence of Idlib more generally but put Latakia, a regime stronghold, in serious jeopardy. The new resistance army seemed to overcome the opposition's chronic fragmentation; it was also well armed and supported by the region's Sunni states.

But Assad's greatest advantage—a fragmented opposition divided into more than 1,000 constantly feuding militias—seems to be back. Recently, over 20 rebel militia leaders have been assassinated, most by a breakaway faction of the Victory Army. The militias that the United States trained and armed at great expense have been crushed, not by Assad but by other rebels.

Meanwhile, Russia's advanced aircraft, helicopters, and tanks have been pounding the Victory Army for months. Russian aircrews fly close to 200 sorties a day, allowing Assad and his allies to go on the offensive in both the north and south of Syria. Ahrar al-Sham has agreed to go to talks in Geneva, an about-face, after snubbing the UN envoy Staffan de Mistura as an Assad lackey only months ago. Al Qaeda's Syria leader

pronounced those who head to Geneva guilty of “high treason,” a clear death threat but also an indicator of clear anxiety. Another sign of desperation was the call put out by the Victory Army to foreign fighters to come join their ranks. Non-jihadist members of the coalition were infuriated by this tactic, which would inevitably associate them with the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS), and withdrew from the coalition. Assad, in short, is dividing his enemies and counting on his ability to pick off one at a time.



BASSAM KHABIEH / REUTERS

A girl carrying a baby inspects damage in a site hit by what activists said were airstrikes carried out by the Russian air force in the town of Douma, eastern Ghouta in Damascus, Syria, January 10, 2016.

To be sure, Assad’s advances have been hard fought and slower in coming than his advisers insisted they would be. The reason is the state of the Syrian army, which is in shambles, worn down by years of fighting, poverty, and corruption. All the same, it is hard to imagine Assad losing or being thrown back to some Alawite ethnic canton.

The real question is how much of Syria Assad can retake. Assad believes that the Russians will carry him to the finish line, but that is not at all certain. The Syrian regime already rules over some 75 percent of Syria's Arab population. Assad seems convinced that he can bully the remaining 25 percent into "accepting" the bitterness of defeat in exchange for the end to deprivation and war. But that will likely take years. Much depends on Turkey and the Gulf states, the primary sponsors of the rebels.

Syria's Kurds may also accommodate themselves to Assad. They constitute ten percent of the population and live in a long ribbon of territory dividing Syria from Turkey that they have named Rojava. Despite wresting the land from Assad, ISIS, and the rebel militias at great cost, the Kurds may accept autonomy within a Syrian state rather than independence as the price of protection against Turkey. Assad, too, may find a Kurdish enclave a useful buffer against Turkey.

Most important to Assad has been the attitude of the United States. U.S. President Barack Obama's first reaction to Russia's entry into the war on September 30 was to state, "We're not going to make Syria into a proxy war between the U.S. and Russia." This was consistent with the administration's long-standing reluctance to go beyond its current support for a small number of armed groups opposed to the Assad regime. Moscow has had a long and important relationship with Damascus; Washington has not.

RUBEN SPRICH / REUTERS

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov shake hands after making statements following meetings regarding Syria, at a news conference in Geneva September 14, 2013.

But Obama has not ceded Syria to Russia entirely; rather, he established a tacit division of labor, by which the United States combats ISIS in the east of the country while Russia combats Assad's foes in the west. Moreover, Obama believes Russia will fail in its endeavor to restore Assad's control over the country as surely as it failed in Afghanistan in 1979. The fight will become a "quagmire," he predicted, which will force the Russians to come back to the United States for a negotiated solution. He might be right.

Although Moscow would doubtless favor a negotiated solution that preserved the Assad regime, Russian officials dismiss the notion that Syria can be likened to Afghanistan or even to Iraq; rather, they insist that the better analogy is Chechnya, where Russia's superior airpower devastated the rebels at

Grozny. After all, they argue, no one is arming the Syrian opposition with antiaircraft weapons, as U.S. President Ronald Reagan did the Afghan mujahideen and Arab jihadists.

The war of analogies rages on a second front as well. The U.S. administration's unwillingness to get involved as a combatant in Syria's civil war—and not to make Syria into a proxy war between the United States and Russia—is explained as a desire to avoid Iraq redux. But in thinking analogically, the president's critics say, Obama has mistakenly assumed that the cost of intervention will replicate the steep price paid by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. Accordingly, the president's alleged fixation on Iraq has blinded him to the costs of inaction, which are on display now in Syria and more broadly within the region: a humanitarian disaster, the empowerment of Russian President Vladimir Putin, ISIS' emergence, Assad's smug survival, and the anguished disappointment and resentment of traditional allies.

> *Radicalization was not the result of the United States' inaction. Obama could do nothing to keep the opposition from radicalizing or from forming myriad militias based on clan, village, and tribal loyalty.*

Yet despite their bitter sniping, it seems unlikely that Putin's activism will lead Israel or allies in the Gulf to distance themselves from the United States. Having favorably compared Russia's indiscriminate use of force in Syria with U.S. reticence, Israeli officials are now fuming over Russia's transfer of weapons and know-how to Hezbollah, Israel's sworn adversary. And as far as the Gulf states are concerned, Putin's on the wrong side in the Syrian civil war. Within Syria, the United States long found Russia's military presence to be a manageable problem in the context of U.S. security requirements in the eastern Mediterranean. Why the presence of a much weaker Russia within a shattered country

whose rump government can't threaten Israel or Jordan, let alone Turkey, should induce panic is unclear. The limited threat to U.S. interests would not seem to be a compelling reason to plunge into someone else's civil war.
It's also unclear what the appropriate analogy might be, if not Iraq. The Balkans intervention took place under very different circumstances, when Russia was too weak, distracted, and dependent on Western aid to get in the way. Libya as an analogy is scarcely more encouraging than Iraq. The Saudi intervention in Yemen is unlikely to result in a more stable and habitable country.

The cost of inaction, where inaction is defined as the failure to turn the rebels toward the West and empower Syria's moderates by providing them with arms and money early on, is difficult to assess. The assertion that the United States has already taken on such costs assumes that had the United States done something, the Russians would not have intervened, the armed opposition would be unified, jihadists marginalized, and Assad on the ropes.

But radicalization was not the result of the United States' inaction. Obama could do nothing to keep the opposition from radicalizing or from forming myriad militias based on clan, village, and tribal loyalty. The same process of radicalization and fragmentation has taken place in every Middle Eastern country where the state has been overthrown by force, whether in Iraq, Yemen, or Libya. Although Syrian liberals do exist, they are not numerous enough or strong enough to take power and hold the country together. In every instance, foreign-driven regime change has led to state collapse, social fragmentation, and radicalization.

Unfortunately, Middle Eastern potentates have built states that are a reflection of themselves; they collapse when the dictator and his family are changed. They do not have professional civil services and are not built on solid

institutional foundations. Regime change brings state collapse. This is what happened when Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was overthrown, it happened with the destruction of the regime of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi, and it would happen in Syria. Getting rid of Assad and his ruling clique would likely lead to state collapse, which is precisely why both the Iranians and the Russians will not risk it. Think of what Saudi Arabia would become without the Al Saud. Even Jordan would likely come unglued without the Hashemite monarchy to bind together its disparate parts. The radicalization and chaos in the Middle East is the United States' fault to the extent that it has pursued too much regime change, not because it has pursued too little.

ABDALRHMAN ISMAIL / REUTERS

Free Syrian Army and Turkish flags flutter over the Bab Al-Salam border crossing, that is closed from the Turkish side, activists said, in northern Aleppo countryside, Syria, January 18, 2016.

To judge how incompetent the rebels have been in providing a viable or attractive alternative to Assad, one need merely consider the situation in the province of Idlib, where the

rebels rule. Schools have been segregated, women forced to wear veils, and posters of Osama bin Laden hung on the walls. Government offices were looted, and a more effective government has yet to take shape. With the Talibanization of Idlib, the 100-plus Christian families of the city fled. The few Druze villages that remained have been forced to denounce their religion and embrace Islam; some of their shrines have been blown up. No religious minorities remain in rebel-held Syria, in Idlib, or elsewhere. Rebels argue that Assad's bombing has ensured their failure and made radicalization unavoidable. But such excuses can go only so far to explain the terrible state of rebel Syria or its excesses. We have witnessed the identical evolution in too many other Arab countries to pin it solely on Assad, despite his culpability for the disaster that has engulfed his country.

Tragically, an Assad victory cannot solve the underlying problems that sparked the civil war, even if the regime defeats ISIS, ejects all terrorists, and facilitates large-scale repatriation of refugees. And no one can stand by watching Syria's descent into ever greater misery without feeling responsible. But neither can anyone seriously accuse the United States of being ungenerous with its citizens' lives and treasure or of having no ideals. Americans have learned the hard way in Iraq and Afghanistan that despite their best efforts, nation building in the Middle East is beyond their ability to carry out alone within fragmented, traumatized societies.

The United States can and will help Syria, but it won't do so by declaring war on the regime or the regime's Russian ally. Nor will it help by splitting the country into a resource-poor and sparsely populated eastern half, where the United States remains locked in a perpetual war with jihadists, while the Russians and the Assad regime sit astride a populous, relatively urbanized western Syria with access to the sea.

Regardless of the dark future implied by the present, the United States and its allies must continue to press for a diplomatically managed transition that eventually leads to Assad's departure, encourage cease-fires that drive down the level of violence pulsing through Syria, ramp up the West's humanitarian work, and, of course, continue to batter ISIS. Above all, it must keep its sights set on a unified Syria, while embracing a resilient approach that accounts for Assad's emerging edge. This is a tall order and will demand a strategic patience that will be tested daily by the mounting human cost of the crisis. But there is no alternative.

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The Right Way to Think About the Syria Talks

They Aren't About Syria, They Are About Russia

Samuel Charap and Jeremy Shapiro

ALAA AL-FAQIR / REUTERS

A view shows a site that contained a drinking water well, damaged by what activists said was an airstrike carried out by the Russian air force, in the rebel-controlled area of Al Ghariya village, eastern countryside of Deraa, Syria November 12, 2015.

The suspension of the Syrian peace talks in Geneva seemed to validate observers' cynicism and pessimism in the run-up to the negotiations. The talks, naysayers argue, are pointless because Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad now has a chance at victory. "Assad is winning in Syria. Russia has shifted the

balance of power there dramatically," Joshua Landis and Steven Simon wrote in Foreign Affairs. "The real question is how much of Syria Assad can retake."

The situation in Syria is indeed dire, and peace is a distant prospect. But much of the cynicism about the Geneva talks stems from false expectations about what they can achieve. Ending a civil war turned proxy war requires building peace one step at time, one actor at a time. The Geneva talks may be formally described as an effort to bring together the Syrian parties, but the most they can actually accomplish is getting key external actors involved in the civil war, namely the United States and Russia, on the same page. From the U.S. perspective, the point of the process should thus not be a settlement. Rather, it should be to create a rift between Russia and the Assad regime and to pull Russia closer to its own position. That would not by itself create peace, but it would be a significant and necessary step in the right direction.

It is possible to create such a rift, particularly since Russia does not seem to share the pessimists' view that the Syrian civil war can be won through military means. According to press reports, Russian President Vladimir Putin sent the head of Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) to Damascus to discuss the terms of Assad's departure in late December 2015. Western intelligence sources cited in the press said that Assad rebuffed the powerful GRU director. For the United States, the GRU's mission to Damascus should be a welcome sign that Moscow remains invested in a political process that produces a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

ALEXEI DRUZHININ / REUTERS

Russian President Vladimir Putin (R), Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (L) and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry attend a meeting at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia December 15, 2015.

Russia's red lines regarding that process remain unchanged: Moscow will not accept coercive regime change, and it will not endorse a process whereby outside powers pick the winners of the civil war. This policy is often construed simply as support for Assad. Clearly, the Assad regime is Russia's proxy and is the beneficiary of Russia's bombing campaign. But Moscow has never been wedded to Assad himself. Since June 2012, when the Geneva Communiqué that guides the current peace talks was concluded, Russia has supported a political transition in Syria that will, by definition, lead to Assad's departure, since it requires the opposition to approve the composition of a transitional governing body. Moscow has reaffirmed its support for that position in two UN Security Council Resolutions, 2118 and 2254, since.

In this context, Russia's bombing campaign, horrifying as it is from a humanitarian perspective, is best understood as a

counter-escalation, a response to the gains made over the summer by the opposition, which left the regime in a precarious state. From Moscow's perspective, the trend lines were leading to a violent overthrow of the Assad regime at the hands of proxies of the United States and its regional allies. The logic of a proxy war dictated that Russia put its thumb on the scale. It is clear, though, that the bombing campaign can only strengthen the regime so much; even together with Iranian support, Russia's intervention cannot produce total military victory because Assad's army does not have the military capability to retake the entire country. Even if it did, the level of violence perpetrated by the regime ensures that it would face an unending insurgency.

A negotiated solution is therefore Moscow's only viable exit strategy. Yet the military intervention has produced a problem: it created the space for a negotiation by making clear to the opposition and their external supporters that, even with more assistance, they cannot win on the battlefield. At the same time, the greater Russian commitment and the tactical military advances have hardened the regime's position in the actual negotiations—in a way that is unhelpful to Russian objectives.

OMAR SANADIKI / REUTERS

Forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad stand on a military truck in the town of Rabiya after they recaptured the rebel-held town in coastal Latakia province, Syria, January 27, 2016.

The United States might be tempted to avoid playing by Moscow's rules in Geneva and instead wait for the inevitable failure of its military campaign. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter said in early February, "I think they have a self-defeating strategy. I don't know how long it will take them to realize that." In this line of thinking, as the United States and its allies continue to arm the opposition, as the Islamic State (ISIS) and the regime increasingly come into conflict, and as the Syrian regime forces prove unable to sustain the current offensive, Russia will become bogged down in Syria like the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan. Why bother, then, investing in a doomed peace process?

But it would be both cruel and dangerous to adopt such a strategy—cruel because it would condemn Syria to many more years of grinding conflict and dangerous because inadvertent escalation between the United States and Russia

is always a risk. Russian-backed regime forces and U.S.-backed opposition groups are battling each other daily while Russian jets challenge Turkey's borders and U.S. planes fly overhead on their way to fight the war against ISIS. Russia and Turkey have already come to blows, and, according to press reports, there have been several near misses between the United States and Russia. Unless the United States is willing to risk war with Russia as it waits for Moscow's strategy to fail, it too needs a process that leads to a negotiated settlement.

The way out of this dilemma is to play to Russia's need for a negotiated solution. As Russian policy implicitly concedes, that solution will necessarily involve the current Syrian regime ceding power to some sort of unity or transitional government that includes many elements of the opposition.

BASSAM KHABIEH / REUTERS

Zahran Alloush (2nd L), commander of Jaysh al Islam, talks during a conference in the town of Douma, eastern Ghouta in Damascus, Syria August 27, 2014. The head of the most powerful Syrian insurgent group in the rebel-held suburbs of Damascus was recently killed in a Russian air strike on the secret headquarters of his group, rebel sources said.

But Assad could never accept that; his regime would not survive. Indeed, he can accept nothing less than total military victory. Assad chose to respond to peaceful street protests in 2011 with brutal repression because he understood even then that accepting the opposition's modest demands would lead to his downfall. The regime has a narrow power base, is dependent on corrupt family ties, and has proved profoundly unsuccessful in managing the economy and providing for its people. Its hold on the country is based on its ability to destroy, not to accommodate, dissent. After five years of civil war, this is all the more true: Assad will reject any negotiated solution.

This latent divergence between Moscow and Damascus will come out into the open only if Geneva produces an agreement for Assad to reject. Washington should therefore do whatever it can to ensure that the talks resume, even if that requires accepting Russia's conditions and officially putting aside the question of Assad's future. The United States should refocus the next round of talks on creating a unity government that Russia will accept, the first task of which would be to arrange a general cease-fire and an end to the violence. The details of the deal are of secondary importance, because Assad will reject it. Russia will then lose its patience with the regime. At that point, the United States and Russia would have a chance at finding a common position on ending the war.

This would be a tall order. But in any proxy civil war, agreement among the external patrons of the warring parties is necessary for a negotiated peace. Getting the United States and Russia on the same page is therefore a necessary step to creating the leverage to bring the war to an end. The alternative is for both to drag out a destructive and dangerous proxy war in Syria: thousands more will die, millions more refugees will flee, and the risk of war between Russia and Turkey and even the United States will increase.

The road to a negotiated solution in Syria is a long one, full of switchbacks. The current Geneva process cannot fully achieve peace in Syria. But it can move Syria toward peace if the United States recognizes that the true purpose of the talks is not to determine the precise contours of Syria's future. It is rather to accomplish the much more mundane task of demonstrating to Russia with abundant clarity that Assad is its problem, too.

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