

Secular Nationalism, Islamism, and *Making the Arab World*

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What have we learned from our failed Middle Eastern endeavors? Journalists and some experts tell us that Bashar al-Assad is a bloody dictator, a war criminal, terrible to his people, and that he should be opposed, with aid and support going to those who would topple him. We are told that some—though not all—who oppose him are throwing off the chains of authoritarianism, and are seeking freedom and democracy. Even the president of Turkey (the re-Islamicizer of his country), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has declared that [The World Must Stop Assad](#). Ergo, we should assist those fighting for their liberty against the oppressive dictator.

Because we keep falling for these lines, veiled—and sometimes not-so-veiled—Islamists pull us into their spheres against brutal dictators. Assad didn't help things by turning to longtime U.S. nemesis Iran (and in actuality Assad's enemy as well) and Russia for help. As of this writing, these tactics have established an Iranian presence in Syria, entrenched with a military infrastructure there, and strengthened the arm of Hezbollah in the region, while Christians in Lebanon, and Israel our ally, bear the brunt of a cunning Iran.

Those who wanted to “strike Syria and take out the dictator” may be motivated by images of suffering, but this is incomplete knowledge. For those looking for realism, I'm happy to fly you out to Arizona so you can meet Iraqi and Syrian Christian refugees. After that, maybe we'll drive out to San Diego and get a feel for “Little Baghdad.” We can hit Los Angeles after that, and then head off to Michigan.

It wouldn't be enough. We would have to travel all over the world to get a true sense of the Middle Eastern Christian diaspora. That is the reality of what happens when America “strikes” Arab countries. The second- and third-order effects reach back home and reverberate around the world for decades. People remember—peoples remember—and people learn to presume and expect that the United States will attack Arab lands whenever it suits its purposes. They have come to believe that the United States is the aggressor. These lines from a dear Syrian friend who lost her little girl in a bus bombing in Syria never leave my mind: “We [Syrians] knew when we saw on television that America invaded Iraq, that one day they will do the same to us.”

This is what people on the ground believe—nay—know.

A people, no matter their religion, deserve more than that. They deserve the opportunity to stay in their homeland. This has not been the case for Middle Eastern Christians, and nothing is happening to change that projection into the future.

What does the war in Syria have to do with Fawaz Gerges's new book, [Making the Arab World: Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash that Shaped the Middle East](#)?

It has to do with the Islamist and national-secularist dialectic that has shaped the history of the region since the beginning of the 20th century, a struggle within the Arab world that has undermined the development of the Arab countries during the postcolonial period. This dual biography of two Egyptians, Gamal Abdel

Nasser and Sayyid Qutb, shows clearly that the conflagration in Middle Eastern lands was kindled a long time ago. In the face of a complex civilizational dynamic, Gerges gives the reader the fundamental answer: What we have intervened in is an intra-Islamic war between the secular nationalists and the Islamists; or, in the words of one of Gerges's Islamist interviewees, a war between "Islam versus apostasy."

As an Iraqi Christian growing up in America but within an Iraqi subculture, I often heard this conflict spoken of, especially as it affected the Christians caught in the middle—from the soft discrimination of yesteryear that drove our family out, to the most recent outright genocide of Christians in Iraq.

Islamists and Secular Nationalists

Gerges, a Lebanese American who teaches Middle East politics and international relations at the London School of Economics, does a superb job in *Making the Arab World*. He begins his telling with Napoleon's *mission civilisatrice*, a campaign to bring the ideals of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to Egypt. This mission [backfired](#), in the sense that it produced in Islamic lands a dissonant dynamic: enchantment with Western technological progress while harboring animosity for Western civilization.

The warped reaction of the Arab world as it encountered the West complicated the Arab colonial period. Gerges has a darker view of colonialism than the one I hold; he believes that the hypocrisy of the authorities at that time is what disillusioned the Egyptians. Regarding the British and the monarchy in Egypt during the 1920s, he writes:

Both regarded constitutionalism as a menace to their hegemonic influence, and they spared no effort to curtail its advance and entrenchment in society. More than any other factor, the British authorities and the maverick king sacrificed constitutionalism on the altar of their narrow interests, a point worth mentioning when pondering the question of why democracy has not taken hold on Arab soil.

It is a human tendency to think in hard and impermeable categories. When it comes to colonialism, caricatures abound. So often we blame the current paroxysms of the Arab lands on colonialism because it's fashionable to believe that it is—was—an inherent and unmitigated evil inflicted upon ethnic people. But without the British helping the newly formed government of Iraq craft [the 1925 constitution](#), this language of inclusion would not have happened: "There shall be no differentiation in the rights of Iraqis before the law, whatever differences may exist in language, race or creed." This worked well in Iraq for some time.

The fact is that simple human agency is meaningful. Pivotal historical moments have been shaped by personal human action and not necessary systems, plots, or grand schemes. Gerges attests to this, and it is one of the themes he hits upon over and over again in recounting the actions of Nasser and Qutb, and the gritty struggle for power between men and political factions.

The experience of minorities was positive, and for the most part good, under colonial rule. (I know this not just from my reading, but from many firsthand accounts I've received from Christians from those lands.) But the desire for Islamic and Arab identity was powerful and so the struggle against colonialism held a disparate band of actors together. The secularists, the socialists, the Marxists, the Islamists were able to unite, for "This fight against colonialism overshadowed their different visions of the political articulation of an independent Egypt," writes Gerges.

Moreover, Germany and the Soviet Union took advantage of Arab resentment and hostility toward the West. The Arab lands were fertile soil for political and philosophical ideas coming from these countries (fascism and socialism). And so, in July 1952, Lieutenant Colonel Nasser and the Free Officers conducted a successful

coup d'état of the British-backed monarchy. As Gerges notes, their emphasis was on decolonization and on communitarian “rather than individual freedoms and constitutional rights.”

Nasser is usually portrayed as a secular nationalist, but Gerges gives us a more nuanced understanding of a man who experimented with many anti-hegemonic ideologies, including his connection with the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the 1940s and into the early 1950s. He also tilted toward the Soviet model in organizing Egypt's economy. Through all of his experimentation he learned, especially after the 1948 Palestinian war (or Arab-Israeli war), that the army is the only way to keep law and order.

The Free Officers and the Islamists both believed that the West had thwarted the Arab world's self-determination, and of Egypt's in particular. But after Nasser's coup, there arose a conflicting vision between nationalists and the Islamists as to what form that self-determination should take. And that political rivalry has shaped not only Egypt but the region since then.

For the Islamists—mostly in the form of the *Ikhwan*, the Muslim Brotherhood movement—Islam was not just a religion but an all-encompassing civilization that had within itself all that was needed for life, including the dictates of how a country is to be governed. They envisioned a Qur'anic political order much like today's Islamic Republic of Iran. That they believed this was the only path to an authentic Arab Islamic identity can be seen in a [1958 video of Nasser](#). He recounts his 1953 conversation with the head of the *Ikhwan*, and his pursuit of some form of compromise between the two sides. He relates that the first thing the leader of the *Ikhwan* asked for was a law mandating every woman walking in public to wear the hijab.

Socialism, Arabism, and Secularism

The national secularists—Nasser and his heirs—were politically and philosophically more influenced by German and Russian socialist thought, which they alloyed with Arabism, than by the Anglo-American tradition. Nasser himself certainly did not believe in democracy. He and the others desired to create socialist Arab nations that could compete economically with Western nations, and attempted to do so by pure authoritarian fiat. At the same time, and *contra* the propaganda the *Ikhwan* peddled about Nasser, the Egyptian leader was neither an unbeliever nor an apostate. Gerges quotes from interviews showing that Nasser stayed a Muslim believer until the end, only that he did not believe that religion should be enforced via state power.

And that brings me to an underestimated point: Middle Eastern Christian and other religious minorities tend to fare better under nationalists. There are two reasons for this: One, the nationalist ideology is more inclusive (by default) as it takes in all the people living in that particular nation, no matter their religion. (In fact, Gerges discusses how in the early days of pan-Arabism and nationalism, many Christians were involved in these political movements because they finally felt included, because it wasn't religiously driven.) The second reason is that nationalists don't want to enforce Islam via state power. This creates social, political, and cultural space for religious minorities of all stripes.

Granted, not to the extent we see in the West. Seen through our Western lens, we tend to consider these “freedoms” laughable and we attempt and have attempted to push the Arab world for more. What we should do, as realists, is consider it a good stage in the evolution of the Arab world.

For Qutb, on the other hand, “The ultimate objective became that of replacing the Nasserist ‘apostate’ state with what was envisioned as a new, more righteous Qur'anic political order,” as Gerges says. A few pages later he writes that during the years Nasser had imprisoned Qutb—from 1954 to 1964—the preacher of jihad “developed a normative ethics which partially crystallized around the concept of politically driven violence. With Qutb, violence is not only used as a tool of opposition to the state, it de facto becomes an identity marker that helps differentiate real Muslims from the rest.”

This is why Christians cannot survive Islamist states. Americans who rationalize support for Islamists over secular dictators, take note. Believe not the propaganda of the Muslim Brotherhood's sympathizers in the West. Albeit, things get muddled in the Middle East, and the line between secular and Islamist may be hard to distinguish given the secularists' use of the Islamists and vice versa—all the more reason for a very cautious and more informed involvement by America.

Is There a Path to Democracy—and Who Cares?

The fact that America has been on the side of Islamists—unwittingly at times, intentionally in others—against secular nationalist rulers—that is, rulers who did not impose religion on the people—has worked against an Arab path to democracy. We saw this with the shah of Iran, and with Saddam Hussein in Iraq. We do not understand the dynamics of the cultures in this part of the world, their value systems and ways of thinking. The brute fact is that our insatiable desire for oil moves us toward short-sighted decisions.

The Islamists talk up democracy and decry the brutality of the dictators to gain Western sympathy and support. This lasts until they gain power. At which point they return to who they really are, enforcers of Islam without any real or lasting ideas for governing a nation or advancing a society.

Gerges returns to that point often. In Egypt, *Ikhwan* leaders “spent decades growing the movement while neglecting theory, public policy, and a strategic vision for the country.” He adds:

One thing is clear: it is unlikely that the Islamist movement will undergo a democratic transformation anytime soon. Historically, when under attack and besieged, Ikhwan leaders hunkered down, trying to weather the violent storm . . . As they see it, ultimately the sacred truth of Islam will triumph over the powerful forces of darkness and apostasy. This conviction is an impediment to critical self-reflection and acknowledgment of what went wrong with the movement.

My opinion (heretical in some circles) is that the path to peace—or at the very least, a quasi-peace—in the Middle East will come through secular nationalists, not through Islamists. Every time we take the side of Islamists we set the region back. The secular nationalists, yes, even the autocrats, over many iterations will settle down into a stable governmental structure of sorts—a space in which the people may actually live day-to-day without fear of random violence or arbitrary intrusions.

No, it won't be democracy as we imagine it. But it could be an Arab world with a strong Arab identity manifested in its plurality, a diversified economy—an Arab world that has more to offer the rest of us than just oil, and that is stable enough so that the peoples of the region will have the choice of staying in their country of origin. On the other hand, if the West continues to support Islamists, especially as a tool to battle Russia and Iran, we will see a Middle East destroyed and used by outside agents for their benefit.

It does not seem to me that a form of democracy is impossible ever in the Middle East; but I do believe that a people, a nation, a culture, must work out its own stable governmental forms.

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