

*Conflicts of the past as lessons for the present*



Will the Arab Spring offer any  
improvement, either domestically or  
internationally, over what it has replaced?

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# An Uncertain New Era in the Arab World

*By Frederick W. Kagan*

The Arab Spring is a series of events of truly world-historical importance. It has already reshaped the Arab World and the Middle East more fundamentally and more rapidly than any event in the past several centuries. Even the emergence of the modern Arab states after the fall of the Ottoman Empire was more protracted and gradual. The suddenness and scale of the events of the past three years has a disruptive and transformative power all its own. The outcome of that transformation is far from clear at this point. It is, in fact, highly contingent on a series of unpredictable events and interactions within the Arab World, between the Arab World and the wider Middle East community, and with external powers, including especially the United States. Two things are already clear, however. The world as we knew it before the Arab Spring is gone forever and will not return. And the nature of the order that replaces it will have profound and lasting impacts on the entire world.

The Arab world has had very little experience in governing itself over the last few centuries. The Ottoman Turks had taken control over almost all Arab communities by the end of the 16th Century and continued to exercise suzerainty over, if not actually to rule, the Arabs until the 19th. As Turkish control over Arab lands broke down, however, other imperial powers stepped in, especially the British and the French during the 19th Century. The first modern Arab states emerged after the end of the First World War and, with it, the Ottoman Empire, as

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various Arab communities achieved independence, often through revolutions against either the Ottomans or Western Empires or, sometimes, both.

The crisis of Arab governance in the 20th Century was not a consequence of any innate inability of Arabs to govern themselves, but rather a reflection of several centuries of imperial and colonial rule during which they were not allowed to do so. When they finally did establish their own states and systems of government, they found themselves without indigenous consensus on what those states should look like and how they should be ruled.

It is far too strong to say that all of the Arab states are imperial inventions with no significance to their peoples, who are thought to yearn for the elimination of those states and the reunification of the entire Arab world under a single dominion. The specific Arab states that exist today emerged during conflicts in which the inhabitants of those states took an active role. The Arab



Revolt against Ottoman rule enabled the House of Saud to gain control of much of the Arabian Peninsula by military conquest in the 1920s and fashion of it a state more or less to the liking of the Saudis. Egyptian and Iraqi rebellions at about the same time led to the formation of states that also saw themselves as being the modern incarnations of ancient empires—the Pharaonic Empire in the case of Egypt and the Mesopotamian empires and kingdoms in Iraq. Although some Egyptians and Iraqis—along with Arabs in other newly-emerging states—believed strongly that the parceling of the Arab lands was wrong, engines of nationalism were often stronger than the drive of pan-Arabism.

That is why nationalist leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt (who was also a pan-Arabist), Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Hafez al-Assad in Syria were able to gain traction and popular support among at least some of their peoples. But the strength of the Hussein and Assad regimes resulted in large part from the support that the minority groups they represented (Sunni Arabs in predominantly Shi’a Iraq in Saddam’s case; Alawites in predominantly Sunni Syria in Assad’s) had received from colonial rulers precisely because they were minorities. Their leaders were willing to exchange loyalty to foreign powers for support against internal rivals whom they could not otherwise have defeated. Arab nationalism in the Levant and Mesopotamia, therefore, rested on minority rule.

It also rested, fundamentally, on secularism. Only the Saudis justified their rule on a religious basis, both because the House of Saud had been inextricably intertwined with the Wahabi clergy since the 18th Century and because it felt the need to defend the Saudi king’s position as “custodian of the two holy mosques” in religious terms. Nasserite Egypt, Ba’athist Syria and Iraq, the sui generis Gadhafi state in Libya all fused elements of nationalism, socialism, and militarism into a noxious but effective basis for power—all of which saw Islamism as a threat to the continued strength and even existence of their states. None of them went as far as Atatürk did in attacking the very role of Islam in their societies, but all of them marginalized religion,

often violently and brutally. This secularism generated (or exacerbated) rifts within these societies both because it conflicted with the beliefs of many Arabs and because religious groups and societies had played important roles in the liberation struggles that brought the secularists ultimately to power in the first place.

Almost all the Arab world had come to live under Arab-ruled states without imperial or colonial interference in their government by the 1960s. It is only in the last four decades or so, therefore, that political debate among Arabs has of necessity centered on how Arabs are to rule themselves rather than how they are to interact with foreign masters, oppressors, and/or exploiters. That debate, moreover, did not proceed from any consensus on the role of religion in government. Arabs have had to work through these issues, which preoccupied the European peoples for at least 1,500 years, in half a century. It should surprise no one that they have not found it easy to do so.

The Arab Spring resulted from the confluence of a number of drivers. Islamists, both political and violent, have been attacking the legitimacy of secular Arab states since their foundations. They have tried, and in some cases succeeded, to seize the opening presented by the Arab Spring to advance their agendas peacefully and by force, but they did not create the opening. The most important driver was the sheer ineffectiveness, corruption, and repressiveness of the targeted regimes combined with a belief that change might be possible. The importance of the second piece was demonstrated by the rapidity with which the Arab Spring spread once it became clear that change really was possible.

But change to what? There continues to be disagreement among Arabs about how they should rule themselves. Islamists won elections in Egypt and Gaza—and even in Iraq, Nuri al-Maliki's Da'wa Party is one of the most Islamist of the nominally secular parties and has been dependent on support from overtly clerical groups. Tunisians appear to be working cautiously toward an

accommodation between more moderate Islamists and secular groups. Islamist groups have also remained marginalized in the halting (and quite possibly halted) process of state-reformation in Yemen. And the Egyptian military's removal of the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammad Morsi had strong, although far from universal, popular support (which is not to say that it was legal, right, or an acceptable form of political change).

One thing that is clear is that Arabs in general do not see representative government as an alien import that is incompatible with Islam. The one thing that all of the revolutions in the Arab world since 2011 have in common is that they installed elected governments in place of dictators. Some Arabists would have had us believe that democracy would never and could never take root among Arabs, and, furthermore, that Arabs as a people did not desire it. That view appears unquestionably to have been discredited. Arabs as a people certainly do want it, participate in elections in larger numbers than Americans when given the chance, and are in many cases willing to fight and die for it, with or without foreign assistance or intervention. If that principle emerged as the central result of the Arab Spring, it would certainly be an important step forward for stability, humanity, the rule of law, and many other important human values in the Arab world.

Alas, it remains unclear if this will be the outcome. Arab leaders have undermined the validity and appeal of democracy in, for example, Egypt, where the military unseated an elected (if incompetent and in many ways malign) government after one year, and in Iraq, where Maliki has been steadily undermining the rule of law and the validity of elections. Libyan leaders, abandoned by the international community (and the United States) after the intervention that helped bring them to power, have struggled to create a state that can function at the most basic level. The state in Yemen ("elected" in a plebiscite with one candidate) is already well down the road to failure. There is real reason for concern that democracy will be discredited in

the eyes of this generation of Arabs because it is so easily undermined and so apparently ineffective at governing.

Violent Islamists, of course, are seizing upon every opportunity to argue that current events prove that democracy is a violation of Allah's will. "Bullets, not ballots," is their slogan in Egypt and elsewhere as they argue that only violence and unlimited brutality of the sort in which they specialize can bring effective and just government to Arabs. Most Arabs have proven remarkably resistant to this argument, despite the obvious problems they have encountered on their rocky road to representative government. But should this vile and violent Islamist view prevail, the outcome would be dire not only for Arabs, who want and deserve better, but for the entire world.



# In the Arab World, U.S. Leadership Still in Hibernation

*By Andrew Roberts*

When the Arab Spring began in December 2010, it presented a perfect opportunity for doing what the United States historically has done best: spreading freedom, human rights, and representative institutions. Through the catastrophic mismanagement of the Obama Administration, however, the Arab Spring instead has only damaged America's allies in the region, and has not sounded the death knells of any of her enemies.

No one has a bully pulpit on matters of liberty like the American President, not even the Pope. The office has been synonymous with the phrase "Leader of the Free World" for decades. In each succeeding generation there has been an American president who has sought to extend liberty in a tangible way, and crucially in a manner that has also fitted in with the unavoidable exigencies of American Realpolitik. Yet by concentrating solely on Realpolitik— and even getting that wrong—President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton completely blew the West's best chance since the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 to remodel the Arab world.

Having failed to have supported the internal opposition in Iran during the 2009 "elections" there, when the Arab Spring looked like it was spreading to Syria in 2011, the Obama Administration ought to have supported the insurgents with more than merely the verbiage poured out by the State Department. The destabilization of both regimes ought to have been at the

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top of U.S. foreign policy agenda. As in the toppling of Colonel Gadhafi, an operation to which the Administration came to far too late and too gingerly, American lives need not to have been placed in jeopardy. In Syria, U.S. money, advanced weaponry (including imposing an early no-fly zone over much of the country), and other more covert support ought to have backed up Obama's and Clinton's seemingly endless reserves of rhetoric. Instead, around 100,000 people have been killed in Syria with nothing positive to show for it, and the distinct chance that Bashar al-Assad will still be in place serving Iranian and Russian interests for years to come.

For all that some historians sneer at Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points nowadays, in fact their forthright belief in representative institutions gave real hope to the inhabitants of a war-torn continent. Franklin Roosevelt's joint declaration with Winston Churchill of August 1941, the Atlantic Charter, reasserted that belief even before the United States entered the war, and still has the power to bring a lump to the throat today. Dwight Eisenhower's denunciation of the brutal crushing of the Hungarian Uprising was the authentic voice of a true leader of the free world. Ronald Reagan's demand to Secretary Gorbachev to "tear down this wall," backed up by relentless Realpolitik pressure on the USSR, led to the greatest extension of liberty since the

end of Nazism. George W. Bush brought representative institutions to Iraq and Afghanistan, whose survival are only now threatened by Mr. Obama's over-hasty withdrawal from the former and plan for an equally over-hasty withdrawal from the latter. (Certainly, the recent terrible bloodletting in Iraq can be directly attributed to Obama's scuttle policy.)

In Egypt today, the vacillations of the Obama Administration have resulted in a situation that has been well summed up by Vali Nasr, dean of the Johns Hopkins University Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies and a former senior Obama adviser, who points out that: "The Mubarak people are unhappy with the way he was shoved off without a thank you. The military thinks we coddled the Brotherhood and didn't intervene to control them. And the Brotherhood thinks that we never supported them when they needed support, and then gave the green light to the military." It may well be that after his commendably brutal suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood, General Fattah al-Sisi will return Egypt to secular authoritarianism, but aspects of his record—including a revealing paper he wrote for the US Army War College—suggest that his goal is in fact a hybrid regime that would combine Islamism with militarism. Where United States interests are left in such an outcome is unclear, but they certainly won't be as well served as they were before the Arab Spring.

Opportunities to reshape as conservative a place as the Middle East come rarely. Because the Arab Spring arrived during the presidency of someone so uniquely unversed in foreign affairs, and advised by a secretary of state so obsessed with her own presidential ambitions that she feared to take any bold step in the region, the United States comprehensively blew its many chances to help channel the Arab cry for change in a way that served freedom, human rights and Western interests. After the French and British leads on Libya and Syria, and the strong stances taken by prime minister Stephen Harper of Canada, it will fall to the next president of the United States to try to regain that all-important soubriquet: "Leader of the Free World."

# Arab Spring and American Winter

*By Bing West*

Four years ago, President Obama visited Cairo, where he decried “the colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies.”

Mr. Obama then declared his own policy: “in this new age, such attitudes are self-defeating.... a sustained effort—to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings.” In essence, his administration would foster Jeffersonian democracy in the Middle East. In a dozen culturally different Muslim countries, the U.S. would work together with moderate Islamist parties to construct a center core of middle-class aspirants. This would undercut both Islamist radicals and autocratic conservative regimes.

The evanescent Arab Spring seemed to confirm Mr. Obama’s vision of a “new age.” But then, lacking democratic institutions and respect for the rule of law, the Middle East again fell apart. The Obama vision was shattered. Our traditional allies—Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—were offended and appalled by how we had condemned Mubarak and ignored their warnings about the Muslim Brotherhood. American planes bombed Libya, ending Gadhafi’s reign. Then our ambassador to Libya was murdered by terrorists, and the administration tried to place the blame on an obscure video on YouTube. Not one terrorist was apprehended.

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When the Egyptian military threw out President Morsi, the administration was left with no response and no influence in that country. “We have to be very careful,” Mr. Obama said, “about being seen as aiding and abetting actions that we think run contrary to our values and our ideals.”

The troop surge into Afghanistan turned into a withdrawal, leaving behind an ongoing war. Ignoring that outcome, Mr. Obama grandiloquently promised a unilateral end to the post-9/11 war against Islamist terrorists. “We must recognize,” he said, “that the threat has shifted and evolved from the one that came to our shores on 9/11.... America is at a crossroads. We must define the nature and scope of this struggle, or else it will define us. A perpetual war—through drones or Special Forces or troop deployments—will prove self-defeating. This war, like all wars, must end.”

How a war ends when the enemy refuses to quit was not explained. Mr. Obama rhetorically deposed of Iraq and Afghanistan as the responsibility and the fault of the prior administration, and pronounced an end to the war against terrorists as Q.E.D.

In the heat of the last presidential campaign, however, he declared that the use of chemical weapons would cross a “red line.” When Assad did use chemicals, Mr. Obama refused to act. Instead, he demanded that the U.S. Congress approve a limited strike guaranteed not to destroy the Syrian leadership. Thus he placed the heat upon the Congress, after he had spent six years persuading the American public and our allies that military force ensnared us in long, unwinnable wars. While the American press focused upon U.S. domestic political divisions, overseas Mr. Obama’s serial indecisiveness continued to diminish America’s standing. As centrifugal sectarian forces gained momentum across the Middle East, the world’s “indispensable nation” retreated. In sum, the Arab spring devolved into an American winter.

The remedial steps are obvious. Secretary of State Kerry has already begun to repair the damaged relationship with Israel. Jordan and the UAE will respond to courtship. Saudi Arabia is more problematic, because its leaders are wise in Washington ways and plugged into concentric circles of power. The Saudis will hold the administration at arm's length. Egypt's military leaders will remain distrustful. Turkey's tilt toward Islamic sectarianism may be somewhat curtailed by the need for financing from the West. Here in the U.S., opening up oil reserves, encouraging fracking and oil imports from Canada would diminish our dependence upon the ever-fractious Middle East. But Mr. Obama is resolutely opposed to these domestic steps.

As for the Islamist terrorists, we must continue to attack and destroy them. Mr. Obama is incorrect in saying "America is at a crossroads," implying that we can choose another road. The mainstream press and the foreign policy establishment, however, strongly support him. They will downplay any gap between his rhetoric and real life actions. But if Iran decides to complete its development of nuclear weapons while Mr. Obama is in office, then his response will largely determine how his stewardship in foreign affairs is regarded. To date, his foreign policy has been notable by its fecklessness. That is unlikely to change.



# Bad, Worse, and Awful in the Arab World

*By Victor Davis Hanson*

Unfortunately most violent revolutions against decades or longer of autocratic rule do not turn out much better and often worse than what they replaced. Napoleon hijacked the French Revolution. The Mexican Revolution left a one-party state. The Leninist minority seized power after the fall of the Czar. The revolutionary turmoil before and during the Spanish Civil War ended with Franco. It took little over a year for the Khomeinists to come to power after the Shah.

What we have seen in Libya and Egypt is no exception. Perhaps the reason is that it takes discipline and rabid ideology to oust authoritarians, and thus zealous, well-organized paramilitary cadres are often the best prepared for that role and then naturally find themselves with the better fighters and the greater prestige in the post-revolutionary sort-out.

The point is that without a U.S. presence like that in Iraq (now politically unacceptable), there is little likelihood of the emergence of constitutional democracy. What is the alternative then? So far we have seen four general categories of Middle East authoritarians: pro-Western and mostly secular military strongmen (e.g., a Mubarak), theocrats and Islamists of various sorts (e.g., the Iranian mullahs and the Taliban in Afghanistan), hereditary monarchs backed by the military (e.g., the Gulf sheikdoms and Jordan), Ba'athist, or pseudo-revolutionary military dictators (e.g., Nasser, Gadhafi, Saddam Hussein, the Assads).

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Among that bunch, the least injurious to the people are the monarchs and the secular, mostly non-ideological military authoritarians. Only the latter offer a viable alternative to the current turmoil—and yet in many cases their kleptocracy is often the very reason for the turmoil in the first place. In this bleak scenario, the key is American pressure and liberalization while an autocratic leader still ensures law and order, and to predicate aid and support on the degree of progress he makes. We had started to do that with Mubarak in the heyday after regime change in Iraq, but quit when the subsequent insurgency deteriorated our credibility, so now we must start again from zero with the current Egyptian junta: to ensure order, introduce transparency and the rule of law, and to establish elections only after the insurance of a constitutional framework that protects ethnic and religious minorities.

Ultimately the people get what they deserve, and until socially, culturally, and economically, the Arab Street rejects centuries of gender apartheid, religious intolerance, statism, tribalism, anti-Semitism, and religious fundamentalism, we won't see much political improvement.

# The Democracy Delusion

*By Bruce S. Thornton*

Most of the reactions to the Arab Spring in the West have reflected a mass delusion brought on by democracy fever. The notion that the Western political and economic model—liberal democracy and free-market capitalism—could arise spontaneously without the centuries-long historical development that preceded its appearance in the West was wishful thinking. Without the social and cultural infrastructure of respect for individual human rights, tolerance of sectarian differences, respect for the rule of law, and separation of religion from politics, any “democracy” constructed after a revolution was doomed to collapse.

Worse yet, those who believed that removing autocrats would unleash democracy ignored the serious incompatibility of the Western paradigm with traditional Islam, which offers little warrant for those features listed above, and much evidence that they are contrary to Islam. Take the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, whose Article 24 reads, “All the rights and freedoms stipulated in this Declaration are subject to the Islamic shari’a.” Given that shari’a law does not grant equal respect and rights to all religions, limits the rights of women and religious minorities, regards homosexuality, “blasphemy,” and apostasy as capital crimes, and acknowledges no separation of church and state in law, it’s hard to see how such a notion of “human rights” can be considered similar to our own or compatible with genuine democracy.

Or just consider the recent history of Turkey. In 1922, Ataturk started the secularizing process to limit the influence of Islam in social and political life, and thus turn his country into a secular republic closer to the Western model. Nearly a century later, Turkey is moving backwards, becoming more

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Islamic and much less liberal under Prime Minister Recep Erdogan. The point is not that Islam and liberal democracy are impossible to reconcile, but that if they can be, the process will be much more difficult and lengthy than simply changing masters or holding a few elections.

So it's no surprise that across the region booting out autocrats and holding elections have not brought improvement, and in some instances have made things worse. The disorder and violence of these upheavals have created space in which numerous jihadist outfits have gained a foothold, as in eastern Libya, where terrorist gangs Moammar Gadhafi once kept in check have grown assertive enough to murder our ambassador and three other Americans in Benghazi. Worse yet, these gangs are gaining valuable battlefield experience fighting in Syria and in other venues. So far the best outcome has been in Egypt, where a military strongman similar to the ousted Hosni Mubarak replaced the short-lived rule of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Unfortunately, the history of the Arab Spring so far suggests that illiberal kings or generalissimos are better for our own national interests and security, and comparatively better for the people of the Middle East who don't want to endorse a political-social order based on extreme applications of shari'a law. Either way, the prognosis for the Muslim Middle East is not good.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

- Mark L. Haas and David W. Lesch (eds.), *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East* (Westview, 2012).
- Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (Public Affairs, 2013).
- Andrew C. McCarthy, *Spring Fever: The Illusion of Islamic Democracy* (Encounter Books, 2013).
- Mary Casey has assembled an “Arab Uprisings Bibliography” of books and articles for the Project On Middle East Political Science.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do moderates always seem to be squeezed out in the aftermath of a dictator’s demise?
2. To what degree have the failures of the Arab Spring, directly or inadvertently, aided Israel?
3. Can the U.S. develop any coherent and consistent policy to deal with the widely different upheavals in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere in the Arab World?