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# THE DUELING MORALITIES OF MIDDLE EASTERN DEMOCRACY

The Middle East lies in the grip of a full-scale civil war. Multiple actors are fighting on multiple fronts and heaping up frightful numbers of wounded, dead, and displaced on every side. In his recent book *The New Arab Wars*, Marc Lynch outlines no less than four axes of regional conflict: between Iran and Saudi Arabia, among various Sunni powers (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates), among competing Islamist networks, and between autocratic regimes and newly mobilized societies. “The Middle East,” he writes, “has rarely seen such a confluence of wars and interventions.”

Muslims are killing Muslims in staggering numbers, but don’t expect much sympathy from Americans. We have our own problems these days. Seventeen years after 9/11, the Middle East seems more distant, backward, and bloodthirsty than ever, and more irrelevant as we near energy independence.

But a massive war at the heart of the world can’t go unheeded for long. The dissolution of functioning states into lawless spaces will enable radical militias and powers like Russia and Iran in ways that harm our interests. The humanitarian toll will likewise burden our conscience, credibility, and international prestige.

Mind you, the chaos isn’t about us. It’s about rival state and non-state actors competing to decide the future political order of the Middle East. From AD 622 until the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, the normative order was Islamic empire governed by Islamic law—the *khilafa* or caliphate. The twentieth century saw a brief experiment in Arab nationalism, an alternative political model based on states rather than caliphates, Arab rather than Muslim identity, and secular autocrats rather than religious ones. That experiment mostly failed and a popular desire for some kind of Islamic governance has returned with a vengeance.

Some Middle Eastern states still preserve some version of secular or moderate autocracy or monarchy (Syria, Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, UAE). Some preserve, or seek to erect, Islamist nation-states (Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas). Others long for a restored caliphate (Da’esh, possibly Turkey under Erdogan). None

of them is truly democratic in the Western sense, and all are walking a thin line between survival and collapse.

We cannot ignore the Islamic civil war. “No great power,” Bret Stephens writes in his 2014 book *America in Retreat*, “can treat foreign policy as a spectator sport and hope to remain a great power.” We must find a way to stop the bleeding, stabilize the region, and advance our national interests. But how?

**ONE SCHOOL OF** thought looks to the strongman. This approach sees the Middle East not as a region of states but as fictitious entities created by European powers. Beneath the straight lines and color-coded countries is a ragtag bunch of clans and tribes that often want to kill each other. The only way to control them is to impose order upon them: to find a strongman who can bully the bullies, enforce the law, and achieve normalcy. Only a man like Saddam Hussein could keep the fiction of Iraq together. Without him, everything fell apart.

One proponent of this view is Egypt expert and Hudson Institute Senior Fellow Samuel Tadros. He recently published a Hoover Institution paper entitled, “The Follies of Democracy Promotion: The American Adventure in Egypt.” Tadros challenges what he sees as the perennial Western illusion of Middle Eastern democracy by arguing the more pressing need for rule of law. “The Trump administration should base its strategy toward Egypt not on Egypt as it should be but on Egypt as it is,” he writes. “The major question of Egyptian politics today is not whether the country will transition to democracy—that was never an option in the past seven years and is still not an option today—but rather, how Egypt’s slow descent into the regional abyss can be prevented.”

But another school of thought does, in fact, look to the *demos* as the key to stability. The Middle East is not inherently anarchic, says this approach. Strongmen and American support for them make it so. Thugs like Saddam Hussein tyrannize their people and drive dissent underground where it festers until it finally explodes. Removing dictators and empowering people to decide their own destiny will eliminate the causes for radicalism and move the region toward a more stable political future.

There is an optimistic wing of the *demos* school and a pessimistic wing. Elliott Abrams best represents the optimistic approach in his new book *Realism and Democracy: American Policy after the Arab Spring*, a careful re-articulation of the Bush Freedom Agenda minus the “fateful association” of democracy promotion with regime change. Abrams believes strongly in the universality of democracy, the moral necessity of challenging despotism, and America’s ability to lead change in the region. He includes important carve-outs and conditions—optimism doesn’t imply naiveté—but ultimately believes that democracy promotion “should be at the heart of US policy.”

The pessimistic approach is best represented by Marc Lynch, who also favors the *demos* but from a distance. Unlike Abrams, Lynch doubts that the US can seriously affect Middle Eastern outcomes and prefers a pullback strategy à la Barack Obama. “There is little which the United States, or any external power, can do at this point to fundamentally alter the trajectory of this unfolding struggle,” he writes. “America would be better served to consolidate its retrenchment from the region and invest its support not in its brutal regimes but in those Arabs seeking a more democratic future.”

Both wings of the *demos* school have to contend with the uncomfortable fact that democracy in the Muslim world may lead to illiberal outcomes. A 2013 Pew poll found that 74 percent of Egyptian Muslims want to enact *shari’a* for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike; 70 percent favor corporal punishment for theft; 81 percent favor stoning adulterers; and 86 percent favor the death penalty for Muslims who convert to another religion. The prospect of a duly elected government giving these illiberal norms the force of law should be enough to give us pause. It is entirely possible that a greater turn toward democracy in the Middle East will produce more oppression, not less.

We must reflect on that truth—and deeply.

**THE MORAL DILEMMA** is stark. Should we support Middle Eastern majorities as they organize their states even when the results defy our notions of democracy? Or should we support Middle Eastern minorities—Christians, Jews, Yazidis, liberal Muslims—who stand in fear of tyrannous ochlocracy? Recognizing this dilemma and understanding its relevance to our national interests is the start of any serious discussion about US policy in the region.

Challenging free peoples’ natural right to self-organize seems immoral. But a democracy that won’t protect its minorities is not a democracy worth supporting. Appeasement of blinkered

majorities may lead to stability in the short term, but regimes based on persecution of different opinions, creeds, and identities will not be stable over time.

We should pursue democracy in the Middle East slowly, carefully, and cleverly. We should focus on states like Tunisia that are closer to the democratic ideal in order to create models for others to follow. We should also recognize that some states are nowhere close and shouldn’t be rushed. We needn’t undermine democratic movements, but we must refrain from a reckless embrace of the *vox populi* just for the sake of doing it.

We should explore inventive structural solutions—federal systems, checks, balances—that will protect democratic gains from majoritarian extremes. Too often we think America works because of our innate liberality; but just as important is the constitutional architecture that sets power against power to guard against faction and tyranny. Unique arrangements like that of Lebanon, a confessionalist state, can make freedom more likely in the clannish, group-based world of the Middle East.

We should also undergird our democracy agenda with a comprehensive policy on minority rights. Protecting difference and dissent should be seen as the key to freedom in the Middle East, not incidental. Our policy should explain in clear terms the moral and strategic importance of pluralism, and link economic rewards to laudable protections of religious, ethnic, and ideological minorities.

As we work to expand democracy, we must also work to *explain* democracy. Abrams and Tadros note both the presence of liberals in the Middle East and the lack of any significant liberal culture. Both mention the pressing need to translate classical works of liberal thought into Arabic—an inexpensive and worthwhile project. This, together with other content and information-related initiatives, will undergird any freedom strategy with a solid intellectual foundation.

We must stay engaged. We must be proactive. Our interests and our morality demand it. We cannot resolve the Islamic civil war or transform the Middle East on our own, but we can accomplish much by working with friends in the region who share our values. Our task is to support them as they better their societies from within, and protect them and their work from the worst urges of the mob. **P**

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