

Don't Party Like It's 1989

Today's turmoil in the Middle East looks more like the stillborn revolutions of 1848.

By Leon Hadar

The uprising in Egypt and challenge to the Middle East's autocratic rulers could have produced a sense of déjà vu for the late German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt. Notwithstanding her reputation as a progressive thinker, Arendt believed that the erosion in the power of Europe's conservative ruling elites and the strong national states they controlled helped set the stage for rise of totalitarianism and the horrific wars that engulfed Europe in the first part of the 20th century.

As Arendt pointed out in her classic study *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the inability of these ruling elites in France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Slavic states to retain their legitimacy in the face of waves of nationalist convulsions ignited by “the people”—the opening chapter being the uprisings of 1848—led to the collapse of the post-Napoleonic European order that had been negotiated in the Congress of Vienna. This created the conditions for the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian empires and resulted in decades of tyranny and bloodshed. A direct line connects the “Spring of Nations” and the wars of the last century.

From that perspective, the protests in Egypt may not mark the beginning of a peaceful transition to liberal democracy along the lines of what happened in the former Soviet bloc in 1989. Instead, the insurgencies in the Middle East look more like the revolts of 1848, the start of a long and chaotic era that will not necessarily bring about political and economic progress. The narrative that romances the revolution could be replaced with a much more complex story, one with no happy ending.

Under this scenario, the U.S. as the current upholder of the global and regional status quo has become weaker, less confident, and more constrained in its ability to secure the foundations of the world order—including the shaky Pax Americana in the Middle East, where the U.S. might not be able to prevent the decline and fall of its Arab minions.

The U.S. has been the last in a series of global players trying to achieve hegemony in the Middle East since the Ottoman Empire collapsed and Britain and France took over control of the region and divided it between themselves. In pursuing their Mideast strategy, the British relied on two major players: the mostly secular Arab-Sunni elites ruling states that included large non-Arab and non-Sunni groups—the Kurds, Berbers, Shiites and Christian Maronites, Copts and Assyrian—and the Zionist leadership in Palestine that confronted growing opposition from the local Arabs.

After World War II, a bankrupt British Empire—which had lost the power and will to confront the rising anti-imperialist Arab nationalists and manage the growing confrontation between Jews and Arabs in Palestine—passed the torch of securing

Western interests in the Middle East to the Americans. Then, in a process that accelerated after the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, the U.S. placed the Middle East on the top of its foreign-policy agenda, with a succession of presidents (Truman, Nixon, Carter) committing Washington to containing Soviet expansionism in the region, securing Western access to oil resources, and protecting the Jewish State.

Under the bipolar system of the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union competed for hegemony in the Middle East through their regional clients—the Arab states, Israel, and the non-Arab powers on the “periphery,” including Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia. Toward the end of the Cold War, there were signs that the regional status quo was being challenged. The 1979 revolution in Iran eliminated a key pro-American client while the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement negotiated that year marked the beginning of the end of Soviet influence. At the same time, Lebanon’s Shi’ites, Iraq’s Kurds, and the Palestinians were beginning to assert themselves.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. was on its way to becoming the undisputed hegemonic power in the Middle East: containing the power of Iran and Iraq; promoting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; and protecting Israel and the pro-American Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. But the American failure to mediate an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and the ensuing Palestinian Intifadah, followed by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, demonstrated the limits of U.S. power and the rising costs of Pax Americana.

The George W. Bush administration’s campaign to “liberate” Iraq and to “remake” the Middle East failed to reassert U.S. power in the region. In fact, its outcome in the form of an Iraq fragmented into Sunni, Shi’ite and Kurd regions—and ruled by a Shi’ite-led government with ties to Iran—as well as the election of Hamas in Palestine and the growing electoral power of Hezbollah in Lebanon, helped tip the balance of power in the region in the direction of the Shi’ite Islamists ruling Tehran, heralding the arrival of the post-American era in the region.

The collapse of Saddam and his Ba’ath Party in Iraq was a sign that the secular Arab Sunni elites’ rule—maintained through the support of the military and the secret services (Mukhabart)—was being challenged by more self-assured Shi’ite players and non-Arab ethnic groups like the Kurds. Sunni Islamist movements were also vying for power in Palestine, Jordan, Egypt and Syria. In Turkey, a moderate Islamist political party—reflecting the values and interests of a more conservative and less secular middle class—was embracing a foreign policy inconsistent with the American agenda, including opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the breakup of the strategic partnership with Israel. The fiasco in Iraq and the failure to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations further weakened pro-American Arab governments, played into the hands of radical Islamists, and created a diplomatic vacuum that allowed Turkey and Iran to play a more influential role in the region.

Indeed, U.S. clout in the Middle East has been shrinking to its lowest point since the end of the Cold War—and the “peace process” is all but dead. The radical Shi’ite cleric

Muqtada al-Sadr's movement has joined an Iran-oriented Iraqi government. The new Lebanese prime minister was selected by Hizbollah. And now Washington faces the prospect of American dominoes in the region starting to drop, one after the other.

Many of these developments were triggered in reaction to President Bush's neoconservative-driven promotion of a democratic agenda in the Middle East. Foreign-policy realists, who appreciated the historical efforts of delegates to the Congress of Vienna to establish a stable order in Europe, were astounded by Bush's policy. Imagine German-Austrian statesman Prince Metternich promoting democracy in the German and Italian provinces and energizing the forces opposed to the European system he helped create. The autocrats ruling Egypt and other Arab states were bound to face opposition at home. Why is it in the American interest to hasten the day of reckoning?

Democracy promoters on the left and the right insist that there is no reason why the post-Soviet scenarios that played out in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia could not be replicated after the departure of the old guard in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and the rest of the Arab world. In fact, there are many reasons why the 1989 historical analogy is not applicable to the contemporary Middle East, but the most important is the lack of the kind of institutions that helped preserve Western traditions and values in Central and Eastern Europe: the Catholic and Protestant churches; labor unions; educational institutes; human-rights groups. No similar movements exist in the Middle East.

In fact, hundreds of thousands of Christians, members of a highly educated and westernized minority, have been fleeing Iraq, Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon in recent years. They recognize what American liberals and neoconservatives fail to admit: the only effective political force in the Middle East today are the Islamists, who in addition to projecting a sense of legitimacy, also control social-welfare institutions and have demography—high birth rates—on their side. One should expect them to demonstrate in any free elections—as they have already done under American supervision in Palestine, westernized Lebanon, and U.S.-occupied Iraq.

In any case, notwithstanding the ideological differences between the Islamists and the seculars, what unites them is hostility to the U.S., which had helped keep their reviled rulers in power for so many years, and enmity toward Israel, which is perceived to be America's partner in crime and the oppressor of their brothers and sisters in Palestine. That explains the growing anxiety among Israelis watching the developments in Egypt.

Interestingly enough, one of the arguments Arendt made in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was that the demise of Europe's ruling elites—the traditional protectors of the Jews—was at the core of the great tragedy of European Jews in the modern times. The new social classes and the rising movements and leaders representing them turned their frustration against a group they associated with the hated status quo—a group that was also very vulnerable. After World War I, the collapse of the old European order helped seal the fate of the Jews. Israel as the historical heir to European Jewry is now feeling the shockwaves accompanying another major transformation, one in which

Washington may not be able to save the pro-American Arab rulers who were open to coexistence with Israel, leaving the Jewish State surrounded by a sea of hostile Muslims.

The lessons of the democratic revolutions of 1848 may be instructive. The uprisings in Paris, Milan, Venice, Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Krakow, Munich, and Berlin, led by members of the middle classes and the intelligentsia, failed to transform the existing order and replace it with democratic and liberal institutions. In fact, the political upheaval helped expose the conflicting interests and values of the intellectuals and professionals who led the revolts and the workers and the peasants whose support they had failed to win. The result was a successful counter-revolution launched by the ruling elites in France, the Austrian Empire, and Prussia. Conservative forces were able to consolidate their power for many years to come and at the same time initiated limited and gradual reforms to placate the restive population.

While the events of 1848 failed in bringing about a liberal revolution, the Spring of Nations proved an important catalyst for the rise of powerful nationalist movements that led eventually to the unifications of Germany and Italy under the leadership of conservative forces. Curiously enough, the growing power of nationalism and the tensions between, for example, the Magyars and Serbs made it difficult rival nationalists to form a united front against the Austrian Empire.

Once the current revolutionary fervor in the Middle East has subsided, it is quite likely that contrary to hopes (of liberal democracy) and fears (of rise of the Islamists), the final outcome will instead resemble the post-1848 scene in Europe. One should probably refrain from “shorting” the Arab autocrats who have proven to be the ultimate political survivors of our time: the Saudi royal family has been reigning for close to a century, while the military has ruled Egypt since 1954. Expect the Assads and Gaddafis and the rest of these characters to employ a blend of limited military force, co-optation of resentful elites, and modest political and economic reforms to try to weaken the insurgencies. This form of Middle Eastern counter-revolution could prove to be quite effective for a time, providing the U.S. with breathing space to reassess its policies—as opposed to being humiliated at the sight of its clients being driven out of power.

Moreover, even if the Islamists end up strengthening their hand in some of the Arab states, it’s unlikely that Islam will serve as a unifying ideological force in the Arab world. If anything, as in 1948, revolutionary convulsions can be expected create further divisions—deepening the split between Sunnis and Shi’ites, marking more starkly the divide between the oil-producing states and poorer regional economies, and empowering separatist ethnic groups like the Berbers and the Kurds.

Artificial political entities like Lebanon, Iraq, or Jordan could break apart. A sense of national identity could create tensions between Turkey, Iran, and Egypt, with a struggle for power between them shaping the contours of a new regional balance, one that will not necessarily try to isolate Israel or eject America from the region—assuming, that is, that the United States and Israel are able to adapt their policies to changing realities instead of

trying to resist them. That American hegemony in the Middle East is coming to an end could prove to be blessing in disguise for the United States.

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