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Burying Pan-Arabism

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The uprisings in the Arab World have generated two competing narratives in Washington. The first has the making of a Middle Eastern End-of-History prototype: The Arab embrace of liberal democracy is another chapter in the historical epoch evolving since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.

The competing narrative—a derivative of the Clash-of-Civilizations paradigm—raises the specter of political Islamist radicalization along the lines of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

Adopting the first narrative generates confidence that democratic reforms may bring to power political players well disposed to the United States and the values it represents. Hence Washington should help accelerate this process through more “engagement” in the form of

economic assistance and military backing for the “good guys.”

Ironically, those policymakers and pundits who draw inspiration from the second narrative seem to arrive at similar policy prescriptions. Continuing American intervention in the Middle East is required in order to weaken the power of the “bad guys.”

So it's not surprising that proponents of the two narratives are calling for forceful U.S. diplomacy to force Libya's Muhammad Qaddafi out of power and to prevent chaos in that country.

But instead of embracing a strategy out of excessive hope (democratic-liberal transformation) or excessive fear (Islamist radicalization), Washington should utilize a realistic approach – a “nationalism narrative.” Like other revolutions that have shaken the world, the most important legacy that the Arab Awakening may leave behind will be new nationalist forces that could shape the balance of power in the Middle East in ways that are not necessarily antithetical to long-term American interests

Indeed, while the revolutions that swept Europe in 1789, 1848, 1917, and 1989 are recalled as the triumphs of radical political ideologies, these revolutions also led to new waves of nationalism. The French Revolution was followed by the Napoleonic wars during which a resurgent, nationalist France challenged the European balance of power. Likewise, the insurgencies of 1848 gave birth to German and Italian nationalism. The Russian Revolution helped consolidate Russian control over a huge empire that eventually crumbled in 1989 under the pressure of nationalist movements in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

What is happening now in the Middle East may be another chapter in a series of nationalist insurgencies that have been shaping regional politics since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Pan-Arabism and Zionism have been the two nationalist movements that have helped mold the balance of power in the region while interacting with global players like Britain and France, and later with the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, as Iran and Turkey were hedging their bets.

The old Middle East order had already started to shatter during the last decades of the Cold War: Iranian-Shiite nationalism defied U.S. power while backing regional Shiite offshoots; Egyptian nationalism challenged Soviet influence and embraced peace with Israel.

The U.S. tried to maintain the regional status quo in the aftermath of the Cold War by using its military power during the two Gulf wars and through its support for Israel and the autocratic Arab regimes. But these efforts only helped accelerate the revival of nationalism and other forms of ethnic, sectarian, and tribal identities. The “liberation” of Iraq and the ensuing Freedom Agenda have not given birth to liberal democracy in Mesopotamia. The entire project empowered the Shiite majority and the Kurdish minority in Iraq—while emasculating the old Sunni elite.

The resurgence of Shiite identity demonstrated not only in Iraq but also in Lebanon and the Persian Gulf helped shift the balance of power in the direction of Iran. At the same time, Turkey has emerged as a regional power, trying to fill the vacuum created by the decline of effective U.S. power to shape outcomes in the region.

From the perspective of the nationalism narrative, what we are witnessing today is the continuing erosion of a U.S.-backed order by national-based insurgencies. In fact, the first episode in the

current series of political changes in the Middle East was not Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution, but the collapse of Lebanon's pro-American government under pressure from Hezbollah, a development that clearly doesn't fit into the liberal-democracy narrative. Yet, the downfall of Tunisia's U.S.-backed autocrat through an insurgency led by secular democrats cannot be integrated into the Islamist narrative.

Similarly, while the violent clashes between the members of the Shiite majority and a Sunni-controlled regime in Bahrain are an extension of the similar sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Lebanon, the uprising in Egypt is not. The demonstrations, which were orchestrated by liberal pro-democracy activists and Muslim Brotherhood members, were a response to Egypt's unique political and economic conditions. And it brought into power the symbol of Egyptian nationalism—the country's military.

It's doubtful that the any new Egyptian leadership will attempt to pick up the mantle of Pan-Arabism. Indeed, the decision to end the state of war with Israel was based on the recognition that the costs of military conflict with Israel outweighed the benefits of serving as the leader of the Arab world. If Egypt succeeds in rebuilding its economy, it will probably try to reassert itself as a Middle East power, competing for influence with Iran and Turkey. A war with Israel would not help advance Egyptian national interests.

Egypt and the Arab world may be entering a post-Pan-Arabist stage in which new national identities and sub-regional groupings (that includes non-Arab entities like the Kurds, the southern Sudanese, and the Berbers of North Africa) will project their growing power.

The Arab Middle East and its peripheries will not evolve into a unified Islamist empire that will try to obliterate Israel. Instead, the Arab and non-Arab Middle East will take the shape of a colorful mosaic of nations, religious and ethnic groups, and a new regional balance of power under which one should expect growing tensions among Egypt, Iran, and Turkey. Israel and other regional players—including neighboring Europe that shares historical, geographical, economic, and demographic ties with the region— will probably look to exploit this tension.

The United States will be best able to influence this long and multifaceted process of political and economic change by operating on the margins and refraining from intervening in regional conflicts and turmoil that the Middle East will experience as the status quo continues to change in the coming years.

In fact, since Washington has been the main backer of the status quo in the region, it could encourage political change by terminating its long-time support for autocrats. At the same time, expanding American trade and investment ties with the economies in the region could help accelerate economic liberalization and the emergence of a productive middle class. But, in the end, the political and economic future of the Middle East will be determined not by outsiders, but by its own people.

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