ARAB SPRING OR ISLAMIST WINTER?

Three Views

Michael J. Totten

The phrase “Arab Spring” is a misnomer. The political upheavals sweeping Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria are concurrent yet different phenomena, and it’s premature to assume that any of them, let alone all of them, will bring their respective countries out of the long Arab winter of authoritarian rule. In the medium term, the number of genuinely liberal democracies to emerge in the Arab world is likely to be one or zero.

I’ve been to all three countries that overthrew tyrants last year—Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya—and I rented an apartment in Lebanon while the government of Syria, which may well become fourth on the list, waged a murder and intimidation campaign against Lebanese journalists and elected officials. The only things these countries have in common with each other is that they’re in turmoil and that they are Arab.

Large parts of Tunisia appear so “Westernized,” at least on the surface, that visitors might think they’re in Greece or even in France if they didn’t know better. Egypt is an ancient and crushingy poor nation ruled, as it has been more often than not, by a military dictatorship. Libya under Muammar el-Qaddafi was an oil-rich dungeon state that had more in common with North Korea and the former Soviet Union than with its neighbors. Syria, meanwhile, unlike any place in North Africa, is a sectarian tinderbox with the potential to Lebanonize or to Iraqify almost immediately upon the overthrow of the state.

These nations differed dramatically from each other before the region-wide upheaval began, so it logically follows that the revolutions themselves, not to mention their conclusions and afteraths, should also differ dramatically. The Arab Spring isn’t one thing, as the post-Communist revolutions

Michael J. Totten is a contributing editor at City Journal and author of In the Wake of the Surge and The Road to Fatima Gate.
in 1989 more or less were, with local variations in only a couple of places like Romania and Yugoslavia. Here each country and revolution is its own Romania or Yugoslavia, differing significantly from each of the others.

Tunisia might be okay. I am too young to have visited Spain in the waning days of General Franco’s regime, but Tunisia looked and felt as I imagine Spain did in the early 1970s, when, along with Portugal, it was primed to tardily join the Western democratic mainstream. It felt pre-democratic in ways that no other Arab country does, aside from Lebanon. (Yet even Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution didn’t pan out. The country was slowly but inexorably reconquered by Hezbollah and its Syrian and Iranian allies.)

Most Tunisian women in the cities eschew the headscarf and dress like Europeans. Alcohol is widely available and consumed more by locals than tourists. The economy is almost as advanced as those of southern Europe, and large parts of the cities actually look like southern Europe. The Mediterranean is a recognizable place despite the civilizational boundary that separates its northern and southern shores. Tunis, on the coast, has more in common with Provence than with its own Saharan interior. And its vineyards produce wine that is almost as fine.

Imperial France left a powerful imprint on Tunisia’s cultural DNA, as did Rome long ago. “The explanation for Tunisia’s success,” Robert Kaplan wrote in the Atlantic in 2001, “begins with the fact that modern Tunisia corresponds roughly to the borders of ancient Carthage and of the Roman province that replaced it in 146 B.C., after a third and final war between the two powers. ‘Africa,’ originally a Roman term, meant Tunisia long before it meant anything else.” This little wedge of a country in central North Africa has been at least partially oriented northward for most of its history ever since.

Tunisia signed an association agreement with the European Union seventeen years ago, the first in the region ever to do so. It is an Arab country, but it is just as much, and perhaps more importantly, a Mediterranean country, in look, feel, and to some extent in cultural values. Women’s rights are far more advanced there than they are anywhere else in the Arab world. The capital Tunis is visibly less Islamicized—and by an enormous margin—than any Arab city in the world aside from Beirut, which is almost half Christian.
Yet the Islamist Party, Ennahda, did very well in recent elections, winning forty-three percent of the vote. Some of its supporters at the polls could be fairly described as Islamic moderates or mainstream religious conservatives, but the party’s leader, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, cannot be. He praises suicide bombers who murder Israeli civilians and the terrorist insurgency that ripped the guts out of Iraq. “Gaza,” he said of the territory ruled by totalitarian Hamas, “like Hanoi in the sixties and Cuba and Algeria, is the model of freedom today.”

This doesn’t mean that Tunisia is an Islamist state all of a sudden. It isn’t. Precious few of its citizens wish to see their little jewel of a country degenerate into warlordism and terror. Ennahda is not armed as Hamas and Hezbollah are, nor does it control the army. Even though Ghannouchi and his so-called “moderates” won, a majority of Tunisians voted against them. Tunisia’s urban liberalism is alive and well even if the countryside and the desert interior are more conservative and Islamist.

Yet the Islamists are still more popular than any other one party. They may never take over the country, but we should take a wait-and-see approach before declaring definitively that it’s springtime in Tunis.

Egypt’s future looks considerably darker. At least initially after the removal of Hosni Mubarak, the country was still ruled by the same calcified Arab nationalist military dictatorship Gamal Abdel Nasser and his “Free Officers” brought to power when they revolted against King Farouk in 1952. The revolution against Mubarak was hardly a revolution at all. It was a military coup d’état against the palace. Though it had the support of the people, that’s still what it was.

The new and improved Egypt is hardly improved. The economy—an emergency-room case to begin with—is spiraling downward. The sort-of liberal activists in Tahrir Square are as disgruntled as ever. The Muslim Brotherhood won forty percent in the first round of parliamentary elections, and the totalitarian Salafists won a shocking twenty-five percent. So not only did fifty percent more Egyptians vote for Islamists than Tunisians, but bin Ladenists won a third of that vote.

“The moment of liberal change hasn’t come yet,” liberal intellectual and Democracy magazine editor Hala Mustafa told me in her Cairo office at the Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. “I was hoping
this revolution would bring something different, that we could return to the liberal tradition that existed before Nasser destroyed it. Egypt had a historic opportunity to revive its liberal past, but the moment has passed. The military didn’t encourage that path, the Muslim Brotherhood jumped over everybody to manipulate the process, and the liberal secular forces retreated.”

Egypt is, in so many ways, the anti-Tunisia. Almost every woman who goes out in public wears a headscarf. I see more men in just one single day with bruised foreheads—acquired by hitting their heads on the floor during prayer—than I have seen in all other Muslim-majority countries combined in almost a decade. The country is, as far as I can tell, the most Islamicized place in the world after Saudi Arabia. It used to be oriented more toward the Mediterranean, as Tunisia still is, but that was more than a half century ago.

Cairo was once a must-see city like Paris and Rome and Vienna, but today it’s a crowded, polluted, and grinding third-world megacity animated by reactionary and authoritarian politics. Its liberal epoch is over.

Egypt does have some things going for it, however. The army, illiberal as it is, provides some measure of stability and is unlikely to lead the country over the edge into full-blown despotism again or another doomed-to-lose war against Israel. It’s still the most powerful force in the country and may only let the elected Islamists have nominal power. At least during the interim phase when I visited over the summer, Egyptians could speak more or less freely and were rarely arrested for it. They could take to the streets and expect to be tear-gassed rather than shot (though being shot isn’t entirely out of the question). They can read opinions across the political spectrum in the country’s newspapers. It’s a libertarian paradise compared with the terrifying police state Muammar Qaddafi ran.

I’ve never seen such a gruesomely oppressive place as Libya under the mad rule of Qaddafi, and I might not ever again. His was the kind of regime that scarcely even exists anymore, and as a buffoonish yet sinister Islamic-Stalinist hybrid it was in some ways unique unto itself. Everyone I met there said wonderful things about Qaddafi in public, yet no one I met had anything but loathing and hatred for him in private. They were terrified of the man and urged me not to repeat what they told me to any-
one lest they be taken from their house in the night and buried in prison. I have heard, but cannot confirm, that one in six residents of Tripoli worked for or with the secret police. The only reason anyone in Libya told me anything whatsoever in confidence is because they knew I could not be with the mukhabarat—state intelligence.

Libya underwent a total regime change. There is little left of Qaddafi’s state. There isn’t even much left of his family. The army has been completely replaced by the rebels, although some of them are former army officers. Institutions and courts have to be built up from scratch by people with hardly any experience in modern politics.

If the traumatized people of this brutalized nation can’t agree on how to proceed—watch out. The country is awash with guns and battle-hardened militiamen. Every conceivable political faction—from liberals and moderates to tribal leaders and radical Islamists—has supporters willing to pull the trigger for what they believe in. Even al-Qaeda has a presence in Tripoli and Benghazi.

Genuine pro-Western sentiment exists in Libya today thanks to the NATO campaign, which is excellent, but everything from this point forward must go exactly right for Libya to emerge as anything like a stable democracy. It could happen. It isn’t impossible. Every possibility is wide open. But democracy is only one possible outcome among many.

Lastly, there’s Syria. Its tyrant, Bashar al-Assad, is still the strong horse. The mostly peaceful uprising against him has now lasted the better part of a year, but he and his loyalists are willing to kill as many people as they think they have to to maintain control. For them, ruling Syria isn’t just about power. It’s an existential fight for their very survival.

The Assad family and most of its Syrian allies are Alawites, a heterodox religious minority that branched off from Twelver Shia Islam almost a thousand years ago. Today they have as much in common with Christians and Gnostics as they do with Muslims, who consider them infidels. They believe human beings were once stars. They worship the moon and the sun. They drink wine in some of their rituals. The core of their religion is secret and forever closed to those not born into it.

“If you’re looking for a pleasant religion that harmonizes with the natural elements,” Theo Padnos recently wrote in the New Republic, “this is
the faith for you.” Yet Alawite leaders managed, through the Arab Socialist Baath Party, to transform Syria into a totalitarian prison state with their own elite as its wardens.

When France ruled Syria after World War I, the Alawites petitioned the imperial authorities for a state of their own on the shores of the Mediterranean. “The Alawites refuse to be annexed to Muslim Syria,” Suleiman al-Assad, grandfather of Syria’s current president, wrote in a petition to France in 1943. “In Syria, the official religion of the state is Islam, and according to Islam, the Alawites are considered infidels.... The spirit of hatred and fanaticism imbedded in the hearts of the Arab Muslims against everything that is non-Muslim has been perpetually nurtured by the Islamic religion. There is no hope that the situation will ever change. Therefore, the abolition of the mandate will expose the minorities in Syria to the dangers of death and annihilation.”

They did have their own semi-autonomous region for a while, and they called it the Alawite State. They even had their own flag. You can see it on Wikipedia. But the French Mandate authorities later submerged them into Syria again, and rather than suffer as second-class minorities in a realm dominated by Sunni Muslims, they conquered the country and made everyone but themselves second-class citizens.

If and when the Assad regime falls, the Alawites, who make up only about twelve percent of the population, will again be exposed to death and annihilation, not only for being “infidels,” but in revenge for constructing and supporting a monstrous political system. God only knows what will happen to the nation’s Christian, Kurdish, and Druze minorities.

The Alawites, not to mention Syrians in general, could get lucky. Syria isn’t destined to go the way of Lebanon, Iraq, and the former Yugoslavia and suffer sectarian communal warfare. There are real signs of restraint and maturity in the land. So far only a few from the Sunni majority have picked up rifles and attacked the regime as the rebels of Libya did. There have been no pogroms against Alawites, and I’m not aware of any intention to start them if the regime goes the way of Qaddafi’s. Syrian politics below the level of the state resisted militarization during a time of mass violence for an admirable length of time. That isn’t nothing. But the sectarian monster nevertheless stalks the country again. The future will be a grim one if that monster isn’t locked up and quickly, if and whenever the government finally meets its demise.
Even if the Arab Spring ends badly everywhere—though I’m not saying it will—there’s still an upside for those who take the long view. The Middle East desperately needs shaking up. The status quo is miserable for the millions who suffocate beneath it and dangerous for those abroad wounded and killed by what it exports.

Almost all secular Arab governments have failed spectacularly in the modern era. Radical Islam, as a consequence, looks good on paper to millions. It’s entirely possible that a large portion of the Middle East will have to suffer under the boot heel of Islamist regimes before a critical mass of citizens get it out of their system, as the Iranians largely have. If that is the case, the next region-wide earthquake may look a little more genuinely spring-like than the current one does.

But it would be rash to suggest that a Middle East dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood is the only possible outcome. It is only one possible outcome. The Muslim Brotherhood has controlled a grand total of zero Arab countries in its entire existence, and it was founded in 1928. Yet even this grimmest of grim viewpoints is more reality-based than that of the starry-eyed in the West who liken the current turmoil to Europe’s anti-Communist revolutions in 1989. Cairo is not Warsaw, and Tripoli is not Prague.

Either way, and for better or for worse, the current upheaval and its aftermath is a gate through which the Arabs must pass. 

David Schenker

In October 2011—ten months after the demonstrations that ended Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s thirty-year tenure in office—a Cairo court upheld a 2005 conviction disqualifying Ayman Nour from participating in the state’s first post-revolt presidential elections. Nour, who in 2005 had the temerity to challenge Mubarak for the office, paid for his insolence by spending the next four years in jail doing hard labor. Clearly disappointed, Nour lamented upon hearing the verdict, “I thought that there was a revolution that had happened in Egypt.”

A year after the revolt in Tunisia hailed the onset of the so-called

David Schenker is Aufzien fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.
“Arab Spring,” Nour is not alone in his frustration. From Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, where tyrants were toppled, to Syria and Bahrain, where uprisings against dictators persist, the trajectory of change in the Middle East remains uncertain. Throughout the region, anti-democratic forces—Islamists, former regime elements, militaries, and external forces—conspire to subvert positive developments. Meanwhile, challenged with insurrection, the dictators still standing have tried to forestall a thaw in their own countries by any means necessary.

There are some potential bright spots. Bolstered by substantial pledges from the Gulf Cooperation Council and a new government led by a jurist from the International Criminal Court, Jordan is currently pursuing unprecedented meaningful political reform that’s moving the kingdom, albeit slowly, toward more representative government. But aside from this, in the near term at least, prospects for the proliferation of liberal democracy in the Arab world do not look particularly promising.

Not surprisingly, disillusionment is starting to take hold throughout the region among “liberals,” a term increasingly hard to define. In Washington, too, the initial excitement over the unprecedented display of people power in the Middle East has faded, replaced by growing talk of “Arab Winter” and a fear that a shift in momentum will help illiberal forces and hurt US interests.

In Bahrain, the minority Sunni-led kingdom’s initial brutal repression of the majority Shiite (and, according to the king, Iranian-inspired and -assisted) protesters, culminated in March 2011 with the destruction of the iconic three-hundred-foot monument in Manama’s Pearl Roundabout. While the circle has been paved over and renamed, the opposition continues to call for representative government and a constitutional monarchy. The crackdown, and the Sunni government’s repeated accusations of meddling by the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, among others, has accentuated the already extant sectarian divide on the island and in the Gulf in general. Should the findings of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry—which documented the extensive human rights abuses and recommended that officials be held accountable—be ignored by King Hamad al-Khalifa, it will only fuel the discontent. Today, tensions and violence persist as the tiny island hurtles toward another seemingly inevitable
showdown. Regardless of whether the largely Shiite opposition prevails and irrespective of its preferred flavor of government, Tehran would view any transition as a strategic opportunity.

Meanwhile, Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, in his effort to avoid the fate of Egypt’s Mubarak and Tunisia’s Ben Ali, has overseen the killing of more than five thousand extremely tenacious pro-democracy protestors. Even as the violence spikes, it’s difficult to imagine the regime surviving the crisis, and the state could slide toward civil war as the demonstrators, increasingly under pressure, begin a transition from peaceful protest to armed insurrection. Although only about nine percent of the opposition National Council’s 230-member government-in-exile General Assembly seats have been set aside for Islamists, the fact that this level of representation is equivalent to that of the liberal democratic “Damascus Declaration” organization is cause for concern. Given the escalating violence, it is tempting to say that whatever comes after Assad will likely be better; but given the brutalization of the Syrian people, this may be a fallacy, and in any case it’s far from assured that whatever comes next will be democratic. In the meantime, Assad has threatened to “burn the whole region” should NATO or the UN pursue military action against his regime.

The political trajectory in Libya—which engaged in a nine-month NATO-assisted war of liberation from Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi—is also unclear. The initial public face of the National Transitional Council, the Benghazi government led by a University of Pittsburgh Ph.D. and a former Minister of Justice who resigned to protest Qaddafi’s human rights abuses, was reassuring. More recently, though, the gruesome summary execution of Qaddafi, and the NTC’s failure to investigate this and other high-profile killings, has raised questions about the commitment of the new Libya to human rights. Equally alarming to some have been Islamist rumblings coming from the NTC and the former Justice Minister’s October statement that the Qaddafi-era proscription against polygamy was “contrary to Sharia [Islamic law] and must be stopped.”

With a population of six million, a functioning interim government, and potential annual oil revenues in excess of $40 billion, post-Qaddafi Libya should have been able to emerge from the fighting in good shape. But the nation is awash in arms. Militias have refused to lay down their weapons and have begun tribal clashes with rivals, terrorizing civilians and engaging in a reign of reprisal against supporters of the former regime. Further complicating matters, one of the militias that has balked at disarm-
ing is the Tripoli Military Council, led by Ahmed Bilhaj, the former emir of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, an al-Qaeda affiliate. At the same time, the TMC as well as other prominent militias, including reportedly the Zintanis, are receiving support from various Gulf states, perpetuating rivalries. With one hundred and forty tribes, more than three hundred extremely well-armed militias, and weak central authority, the challenges facing the new Libyan government are legion.

Putting aside concerns that some of the regime’s remaining stocks of chemical weapons, which went unsecured for a time, may now be missing, it’s already been confirmed that more than twenty thousand man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) have vanished. Reports suggest that these missiles—which are capable of downing both military and civilian aircraft—as well as other heavy weapons, have found their way to Chad, Niger, Mali, Egypt, and Gaza.

Even in Tunisia, long considered among the best-educated and most liberal and Western-oriented of Arab states, the fate of liberal democracy is unclear. During its first post–Ben Ali elections this October, Ennahda, the Islamist “Renaissance” Party, won more than forty percent of Tunisia’s Constituent Assembly seats. While the internationally monitored elections were judged free and fair, and the Islamist party’s leader Rachid al-Ghannouchi has vowed to establish a pluralist state and enter into a coalition with secular parties, and has articulated his opposition to “the imposition of the head scarf in the name of Islam,” earlier and less expedient statements made by Ghannouchi during his twenty-two years in exile reveal a more militant agenda. In 1990, for example, he demanded that Muslims “wage unceasing war against the Americans until they leave the land of Islam, or we will burn and destroy all their interests across the entire Islamic world.” More recently, in May 2011 Ghannouchi referred to Israel as a “germ” and predicted the state’s annihilation by 2027.

At the same time, there are already indications that Ghannouchi and Ennahda are not as democratic as suggested. In October 2011—in a stunning example of the type of liberties that are at risk in Tunisia—Ghannouchi defended protesters who ransacked a local television station that aired Persepolis, a film critical of the Iranian revolution. These days, Ghannouchi says he’d like Ennahda to follow the model of Turkey’s Islamist Justice and Development or AK Party. While the AK typically passes in the West for “moderate,” secularist Turkish advocates of liberal democracy who are watching the erosion of basic rights such as freedom of the press do not
any longer consider their state a “model.” In any event, it’s not at all clear that Ennahda’s constituents are as “enlightened” as the organization’s leader, or that the party won’t be outflanked by Tunisia’s growing, indigenous, militant Salafist movement.

While politics in Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria are important, what transpires in Egypt with its eighty-three million people will largely determine where the extraordinary events of 2011 lead in the region. The toppling of the thirty-year president, Hosni Mubarak, dramatically raised expectations among the population. Egyptians anticipated not only better governance, but an improvement to their financial situations. One year after the revolt, however, little if any progress has been made on either front.

Indeed, in terms of economy, there has been a marked deterioration of conditions since February 2011. Frequent, large-scale demonstrations and a generally poor security situation have scared away tourism and foreign direct investment, two key sectors of the economy. Not only are incomes down, so is growth, which is contributing to a rise in unemployment. The numbers tell the story: even if Egypt is fortunate enough to reach zero percent growth in FY2011, an additional 750,000 (mostly youths) will be added to the state’s already considerable ranks of the jobless. Making matters worse, with all the uncertainty surrounding Egyptian politics, it’s unclear when either sector will rebound. These internal developments are having a real impact on the state’s macroeconomic well-being: since the uprising, Egypt’s foreign reserves have plummeted from $36 billion to an estimated $20 billion and are being disbursed at a rate of $2 billion a month.

The political trends in Cairo likewise provide little reason for optimism. While the freedom of expression immediately after Mubarak’s fall was unprecedented, this brief springtime was soon replaced by stormier weather. In the fall of 2011, reports proliferated of arrests and detentions of Egyptians for violations of speech prohibitions. In October alone, one blogger was arrested and sentenced in a civil court to three years for “contempt of religion” for articulating an unfavorable view of Islam, and both activists and bloggers were incarcerated and put before a military court on charges of “insulting the army.” The latter of these crimes—brought by the ruling Supreme Military Council (SMC)—consisted of civilians complaining about the nondemocratic nature of the Army.
Throughout Egypt, polling suggests that the military remains popular and respected for its role during the revolt. Among the so-called “liberals,” however, the institution has lost its luster. The SMC’s heavy-handedness, faintly sinister opacity, and peremptory decisions on a host of issues, from the new constitution to the timing of the elections, have proved quite unpopular, particularly among Egypt’s non-Islamists. Given the creeping authoritarianism, one US-based analyst recently asked whether cynics might be wondering whether the revolt was “merely replacement of an eighty-two-year-old Air Force general”—Mubarak—“with a seventy-six-year-old Army general”—Minister of Defense Mohamed Tantawi.

Islamists aren’t particularly pleased with the SMC, either. Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is deeply opposed to the military’s efforts to enshrine supra-constitutional principles ensuring the “civil state” and preventing the legislature from passing laws affecting the armed forces without the military’s consent. The Islamists likewise reject the SMC’s attempt to insinuate itself into the constitution-drafting process. Should the SMC’s gambit succeed, it would prevent the Islamists—who are likely to control the parliament—from selecting the committee that writes Egypt’s new constitution. It would also institutionalize a military role in Egyptian politics going forward.

The military’s attempt to change the rules so late in the game prompted a significant popular backlash in November 2011 that continues to today, resulting in Tahrir Square demonstrations reminiscent of the February revolt that toppled Mubarak. With dozens killed and hundreds wounded, it was unclear, just days before the start of the elections, whether they would proceed. In the midst of this violence, the Egyptian daily Youm Saba ran the headline “Egypt returns to point zero.”

If and when the SMC actually return to the barracks, it’s not going to be the “liberals” who set the tone. While it’s possible that Egypt will retain a presidential system of government, the Islamists will control the parliament. In fact, taking a cue from Ennahda’s electoral victory in late October, the MB announced that its Freedom and Justice party would increase the number of candidates standing for the People’s Assembly from forty-nine percent, or two hundred and forty-four, to four hundred of the lower house’s four hundred and ninety-eight elected seats. Together, Freedom and Justice and the more hard-line and increasingly popular Salafist party al-Nour will control a decisive majority in the new parliament.

Given the changed political culture of post-Mubarak Egypt, an Islamist
landslide could have a significant impact. Putting aside the potentially serious implications for the peace with Israel and Egyptian-US relations, the MB’s policy that sharia, or Islamic law, will “represent the governing principle in defining priorities of objectives, and policies, and strategies” cannot help but affect domestic governance. Consider, for example, that Hazim Abu Ismail—a leading Islamist who is floating a run for the presidency—advocates the re-imposition of the jizya, a special tax on all non-Muslim men of military age. While there’s no need to panic that Egypt will soon join Iran as an Islamic Republic, over time (but beginning immediately), an Islamist parliament could chip away at the largely secular legal framework.

Indeed, notwithstanding the Muslim Brotherhood’s irritation with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s September 2011 suggestion that Egypt should adopt the Turkish system of government and ensure the secular nature of the state in its constitution, it appears that the MB is indeed pursuing the Turkish model. Not the old, pre-Erdogan paradigm, wherein the military served as the guardian of secularism in the state, but a new model, in which an Islamist party (i.e., the AKP) secures a majority in Parliament and then gradually leverages its legislative authority to divest the military of its traditional power and target secular political opponents.

Few who have traveled to the Middle East since the uprisings began would dispute the vastly changed atmosphere there, especially the increased freedom of speech and the animation of political discussion. Regardless of how one views the future of the ongoing uprisings, ending authoritarian regimes is a positive development for the peoples of the region. But that assessment could change should secular dictators be replaced with theocratic dictators.

In light of the trends, it seems almost inevitable that much of the political space in the region will soon be dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafists, who will, as always, focus on dawa, or Islamic propagation. By controlling the education and social affairs–related ministries, the Islamists will have even more of a leg up on radically transforming society in their direction. It will be difficult in this environment for “liberal” or secular parties to survive, much less thrive.

Instead of liberal democracy in the region, populist and Islamist politics will likely fill the gap left by the authoritarians. Of course, should the
Islamists take power and fail to govern well, eradicate endemic corruption, create jobs, and improve the economy, they too can be voted out of power. That is, provided that these states continue to hold elections and viable alternatives are not snuffed out. The challenge for Washington in the coming years, then, will be to maintain relations with Islamist states, while simultaneously helping to preserve and strengthen ostensibly liberal parties.

Accomplishing these goals will not be easy. Some of the emerging governments in the region—Islamist or otherwise—may be overtly hostile toward the US. It’s also conceivable that a democratically elected Arab government or two will be committed to the destruction of the state of Israel, a policy that would complicate productive US bilateral relationships with these states. And supporting the non-Islamist opposition in these states—via the provision of US technical assistance, for example—would almost certainly be viewed by the Islamists as interference in domestic affairs.

The Arab uprisings—the intifadas against tyranny—were and are a remarkable accomplishment for the peoples of the Middle East. But they were only the end of the beginning. During a speech given in Washington in early October, Abdel Monem Said Aly—a Mubarak appointee who served until the revolt as head of Egypt’s government-funded Al Ahram Center—opined that he didn’t like the term “Arab Spring.” In the Middle East, he explained, “We go from winter to summer and in between there are only sandstorms.” Abdel Monem’s reference suggests the turbulence and uncertainty of the period ahead. But based on the current trajectory, an even better metaphor might be February 2nd, Groundhog Day, when we find ourselves waiting to see just how much longer winter will last.

**Hussain Abdul-Hussain**

Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty-six-year-old street vendor, is given credit for touching off the Arab Spring by setting himself on fire to protest the arrogance and corruption of the Tunisian government, but in fact the massive changes associated with this movement had been brewing for some time, with US policy toward the region playing a major role in their development.

Hussain Abdul-Hussain is the Washington bureau chief for the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al Rai* and has contributed commentary to many American and Mideast media outlets.
Glad to continue to benefit from America’s political and economic largesse in the post-Cold War world, Arab regimes were also happy to see the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, which were at the heart of US Middle East policy, stall and used the process as a smokescreen to hide their states’ nepotism, failing policies, corruption, and lack of freedom.

Arab autocrats struck a deal with big segments of their middle class, which had slowly begun to expand in the post-Cold War era of liberal economics. Merchants were allowed to grow their businesses on the condition that they would not challenge the rule of their dictators and would share profits with them and their families. The West turned a blind eye to such despotism as long as the despots provided stability and kept the oil flowing. But the stability established by this mutual back scratching came at the price of popular frustration that found an anti-Western and anti-American channel that culminated in the 9/11 attack.

As America tried to understand the socioeconomic background that produced the 9/11 killers, one of the most carefully scrutinized documents was the 2002 United Nations Arab Human Development report, which found that “GDP in all Arab countries stood at $531.2 billion in 1999—less than that of a single European country, Spain,” at $595.5 billion. It also said that the Arab world “translates about 330 books annually, one fifth of the number that Greece translates,” and that “cumulative total of translated books since the Caliph Maamoun’s time (the ninth century) is about 100,000, almost the average that Spain translates in one year.”

Such a gloomy picture led intellectuals to believe that improving the socioeconomic and political conditions was a prerequisite for any meaningful change in the terrorism-breeding Arab societies. Iraq was the starting point. But toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime did not gain America credit in the region because Middle Eastern autocratic regimes, some of them Washington’s allies, feared that any democratic success in Iraq might result in a domino effect that would end their own rules, and therefore worked to stop the democratic experiment in Iraq. Their intelligence groups facilitated arming and training Iraqi insurgents and suicide bombers, and their effective media outlets depicted America’s effort as an imperial quest for invading and occupying Arab lands indefinitely.

In 2006, as a result of the high casualty rates and domestic political turmoil provoked by the war, Washington began to abandon the nation-building and democracy-spreading that had briefly provided the rationale for its adventure in Iraq and focused instead on stabilizing security and
handing over the country to a barely functional Iraqi state so that it could withdraw. By doing so, Washington abandoned its idealistic strategy and returned to its pre-9/11 foreign policy, focusing on national interests and realism instead of grandiose, long-term plans.

With the election of Barack Obama, what had been an active “spreading” of democracy under George W. Bush was downgraded, in his 2009 Cairo speech, to mere “supporting” of it. American policy toward Egypt became a case in point.

The Bush administration had increased the share of the $1.7 billion in aid given by the US to Egypt devoted to democracy and good governance from $37 million to $86.5 million—or about a fifth of its annual cash package to Cairo, a development that did not please President Hosni Mubarak. Under Obama, the annual sum dedicated for democracy promotion went back to its pre-9/11 levels, which caused a thaw in US-Egyptian tension and prompted Mubarak’s first visit to the White House in years. It was clear that America had given up on spreading democracy in the Arab world and had returned to business as usual in the Middle East, with overtures to Mubarak, Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, Libya’s Muammar el-Qaddafi, and other Arab dictators who had found themselves on Washington’s bad side throughout most of the 9/11 decade.

Arab populations, however, had tasted something in the air as a result of Washington’s brief emphasis on democracy promotion in the region and were not ready to go back to that status quo that it had discredited.

The Arab Spring was not the first time that the Arabs have called for change in the face of doggedly stubborn autocrats, but rather the first time their calls seem to have paid off. When the European flames of national sovereignty started reaching the Arabs in the mid-nineteenth century, a debate broke out over the rule of the Istanbul-based Ottoman Muslim caliph. While opponents of the Turkish rule called for Arab independence, proponents of maintaining an Islamic sovereign argued in favor of keeping the “enlightened despot,” as long as he provided stability and maintained state benevolence. After 9/11, when America came to Arab autocrats with demands to either democratize or get toppled, the dictators revived the “enlightened despot” argument in their dialogue with their citizens. Using images of brutality from Iraq, the rulers of Egypt,
Hussain Abdul-Hussain

Syria, Lebanon, and other Arab countries gave their constituents a clear choice: either stability under dictatorship or civil war if it were gone. The Egyptian people chose to throw caution to the wind.

Their uprising followed in the footsteps of Tunisia’s, in which there were a relatively small number of casualties and a relatively swift departure by the sovereign. Partly because of this transition, partly because of a more cosmopolitan social setting, democracy looks more promising in Tunisia, where free elections were held in October, than in Egypt, where the dominance of the ruling military council—coupled with endless squabbling—foretells the coming of turbulent political and economic times.

According to one of the most important current Egyptian thinkers, Alaa al-Aswany, “When Mubarak was forced to step aside… millions of Egyptians celebrated victory and went home. [They] should have [instead] stayed in Tahrir Square and chosen people to speak in their name and negotiate with the military council until their demands were met in full.” But how could the millions of Egyptians in Tahrir Square choose their representatives? Who would have been eligible to run or vote? And why the assumption that all those who stood in Tahrir Square that night shared a similar set of “demands”? Should not those absent then also be represented in post-revolutionary Egypt?

When revolutionary leaders have made little improvement, they often seek to vilify old rulers—the easiest of populist tactics, but a waste of time that only helps to deepen cleavages among the population. This is what has happened in Egypt with the obsession with Mubarak and the way that the confused revolution has channeled its hatred against the 1979 Egyptian peace treaty with Israel. Later, the same hatred was directed against the presumably interim military council. Ideas on how to move on after Mubarak were either scarce or confused. At the state-run University of Cairo, professors went on strike to demand the election of college deans, accusing the incumbent leadership of being “remnants” of the deposed Mubarak regime. The concept of academic peer review and merit was displaced by populist slogans of democracy, a bad omen for an uprising that was in desperate need of some mature ideas.

But other Arab revolts could go worse. Because the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh was never in charge of most parts of the country, Yemen’s revolution took the shape of a tribal feud. While it is clear that after thirty-three years as “president,” Saleh should make way for someone else, Yemen stands at a great disadvantage compared to other Arab countries.
that succeeded in toppling their dictators. With or without Saleh, Yemen lags behind on all indicators of governance, freedom, human rights, women’s rights, and the rule of law. The country also suffers from deep fractures with autonomous northern and southern regions and from the spread of terrorist al-Qaeda cells. After Saleh, Yemen will have a long way to go to find its way to normalcy, if it ever does. In the meantime, it might linger between civil war and lawlessness.

In oil-rich Libya, a well-resourced Qaddafi would have smashed his opponents with military force, had it not been for NATO’s intervention that eventually tipped the balance against one of the world’s longest ruling dictators.

The uprisings in Bahrain and Syria took yet a different path. The heterogeneity of the populations in these two countries meant that the ruling minority could count on the support of some army divisions and a considerable number of coreligionists who clearly feared a repeat of the Iraqi scenario where the minority Sunnis were trounced, and later punished by the Shiite majority, until America redressed the balance.

Bahrain is the host of the US Fifth Fleet, and in his May 2011 speech on the Arab Spring, President Obama said: “Bahrain is a long-standing partner, and we are committed to its security.” He added: “We recognize that Iran has tried to take advantage of the turmoil there, and that the Bahraini government has a legitimate interest in the rule of law.” Not surprisingly, the Bahraini monarch got away with the least international reprimand, thus making it possible for him to smash demands for democracy on the part of his majority Shiite subjects by importing non-Arabic-speaking Sunni loyalists from Pakistan to beef up units of his loyal security personnel. To justify his brutality, King Hamad al-Khalifa depicted his crackdown as a Sunni effort to contain Iran’s expanding Shiite influence in the region, a narrative Obama supported when he described the uprising as “turmoil” and implicated Iran as having played a central role in fomenting it.

“The only way forward [in Bahrain] is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue,” said Obama, giving the Bahraini despot an option he did not offer to Mubarak, Qaddafi, or Syria’s Assad, even though both Mubarak and Assad had clearly articulated their intentions to talk to their opponents to defuse the uprisings against their rules. No one ever believed Mubarak’s or Assad’s promises of dialogue, just like no one bought that Khalifa was sincere in his overtures to democracy seekers in
Bahrain, but by taking the side of the Bahraini despot against his people, the United States delivered a setback to democracy in the region.

Even more disappointing was the Obama administration’s failure in Syria, Iran’s chief client since Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic Republic was established in 1979, and a place where Washington’s interests and principles would seem to converge. The fall of Assad would sever one of the main links of the alliance between Iran and its proxies, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. But incomprehensibly, Washington did nothing as, for the first time in a generation, peaceful Syrian protesters succeeded in mounting serious challenge to Assad’s rule and he responded by killing, so far, more than five thousand of them.

Obama’s hands-off tactics, also known as “leading from behind,” let Moscow and Beijing veto a Security Council resolution against Assad’s massacres, and put Turkey, which calls itself a regional power despite its lack of achievement, in charge of dealing with Syria. Even though Turkey depends heavily on intelligence pictures from US drones to locate Kurdish fighters of the PKK and combat them in its southeast, Washington failed to convince Ankara—Syria’s biggest trade partner—to return the favor by imposing economic sanctions on Assad.

The comprehensive change Arabs have sought over the past several months has altered many of the old perceptions about what Arabs think. First and foremost, the Arab Spring showed that the region was not as focused on Palestine as it has been always depicted to be. Save for some mob assault on the building of the Israeli Embassy in Cairo, Arab protesters have yet to raise slogans that show serious antagonism toward outside powers, as did Iranian revolutionaries in 1979. It seems that the rebelling Arabs now understand that their rulers have been using Palestine as a diversion for the past six decades, during which the cumulative number of casualties in the Arab-Israeli conflict pales beside the number of Arabs killed by their rulers.

Arab courage and defiance of brutal security forces, despite the improving economies of Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria and the relative affluence of Libya and Bahrain, has debunked thoughts that the Arabs were not ready for democracy and that they preferred stability over freedom. But it is also true that change does not come through courage alone. Decades of autoc-
racy have substantially undermined the two groups on which successful change most depends: the middle class and the intellectuals.

During the buildup to the Iraq War in 2003, the prowar Arab and Western intelligentsia suggested that post-Saddam Hussein Iraq would be influenced by the “one million engineers” that lived in the country. In April, one million Iraqi looters and saboteurs showed up in the streets instead. Their vandalism later metamorphosed into organized crime and terrorism directed at Iraqi government and US troops that neither the Iraqi politicians nor the American military could stop. It is likely that the governments of the post-dictator era in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya—and probably Syria and Yemen—will resemble that of Iraq, tainted by endless bickering, nepotism, corruption, and occasional flares of inter-communal violence. Success and failure will vary among these different countries depending on their natural wealth, the size and homogeneity of the population, past political experience, and the stance of world powers.

The transformation from autocracy to democracy has never been smooth. The success of the next phase of the Arab Spring will be determined to some extent by the amount of international support it receives. Part of that support must be the recognition that there will be setbacks, but that, patiently overcome, they will strengthen the development of democratic institutions in the region. For the first time in their history, the Arab people are experimenting with democracy. They cannot succeed if the world is too scared that they will make mistakes.