



The Strange Survival of the Arab Autocracies

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Five or six years ago, it felt like the springtime of the Arabs. The Iraqi experiment had survived the assault on it by the jihadists, the media, and the rulers of the neighboring Arab states. Much as Arabs discounted the new order in Iraq as the imposition of an American imperium, much as they spoke of a despotic Iraqi culture that knew no middle ground between anarchy on one side and tyranny on the other, a democratic example was putting down roots in the most arid of soil.

The Lebanese, doubtless to their own astonishment, had come out into the streets of Beirut to demand the end of Syrian rule and tutelage over their country. The small republic by the Mediterranean had found its voice, and its Cedar Revolution bore a striking resemblance to the revolts that brought down Communist rule in Eastern and Central Europe.

The Egyptians, too, had stirred; they had wearied of the military regime that had snuffed out a once vibrant culture. They wanted done with Hosni Mubarak, an aging autocrat who had become Pharaoh in his own right. A constitutional movement *kifaya* (Enough!) harked back to a time during the interwar years when Egyptians were participants in the political life of their land.

There was even talk then of a Damascus Spring, the tyranny of Hafez Assad, bequeathed to his son Bashar, finding the dignity of a new political way.

Amid all that tumult, it was hard to resist the siren of liberty. Forgive the personal reference, but it was in that time that I shed my pessimism about the political ways of the Arabs. I had always despaired of the democratic potential of these societies, I had always thought, I will own up to it, that they had terrible rulers and worse oppositionists. They feared freedom, I had believed, and the liberalism would always be fleeting and frail, overtaken by sectarianism, or the curse of oil, or the pathologies of nationalism that had the gaze of the Arabs forever fixed on the fear of foreign demons.

This was the despots' dreamland, I had thought. Better sixty years of tyranny than one day of anarchy, ran a powerful maxim. There was that big Arab prison, and beyond its walls was the heath, wilderness. Men and women feared what lay beyond the prison walls. The rulers seemed sly to me, public opinion easy to mold and easily discouraged. In the terrible national security states—Syria, Libya, Iraq, the Sudan—the rulers had been ready to kill en masse, and it was reasonable for a frightened middle class to duck for cover and tend to private concerns.

That springtime of the Arabs had worked its spell on me. This was "The Autumn of the Autocrats" as I wrote in an essay for Foreign Affairs in the spring of 2005.

The revolt of the Lebanese—Lebanon was my birthplace—doubtless moved me. It would have been heartless not to celebrate their rebellion. They had been a captive people, traders and cultivators and entrepreneurs who had not bothered to build a strong state of their own.

American power, above all, gave me heart. Historically on the side of the dominant order of dynasties and autocrats, the weight of American power, under George W. Bush, was now arrayed on the side of freedom. The American leader who had overthrown the tyranny of Saddam Hussein was willing to bet on liberty's possibilities in other Arab lands. He was to announce the birth of this new "diplomacy of freedom" in a startling speech that he gave before the National Endowment for Democracy on November 6, 2003.

The bargain with the autocracies would now be severed, President Bush proclaimed.

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. So long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place for stagnation, resentment, and violence for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country, and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.

Timing, of course, offers a partial explanation for this mea culpa. The Iraq war had entered a difficult stretch, the hunt for weapons of mass destruction in that country had run aground, and Saddam Hussein was still on the loose, some seven months after the fall of Baghdad. The Iraq war was being given a new rationale, but Bush had nonetheless unleashed a mighty storm on the stagnant Arab world. He had given courage to the besieged and outgunned "liberals."

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It was in that time of hope that I set out to read the chronicles of the revolutions of 1848 in Europe. The first revolution had broken out in France, then spread to the Italian states, the German principalities, and to the remotest corners of the Austrian empire. There must have been fifty of these revolts.

In a seminal book by historian Priscilla Robertson, "Revolutions of 1848, a Social History", a meditation by a Piedmontese aristocrat, Massimo d' Azeglio, on the revolts all around him caught my attention. It spoke so directly, I thought, to this Arab moment. "The gift of liberty is like that of a horse, handsome, strong, and high-spirited. In some it arouses a wish to ride, in many others, on the contrary, it increases the desire to walk." I had seen the Arabs walk for a long stretch of their history. Perhaps, I thought, this was their time to take that heady ride.

At the remove of a brief interlude, we can now unequivocally admit that the forces of Arab autocracy

have turned back the challenge to their dominion. True, they had been unable to overthrow this chaotic new democracy in Iraq. The Arab brigades had not converged on Baghdad, from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Syria. American power had provided a shield for this new Iraqi order. And the Iraqis were to develop a surprising attachment to this new experiment with liberty.

There was blood in the streets, and there was chaos, but the Iraqis were to discover deep within them a taste for elections, and for a political life beyond despotic rule. For their part, the Arab autocrats nearby had waited out the appeal of Iraq's liberty. They had proven effective, it has to be granted them, at frightening their own populations with the violence that was playing out in Iraq.

What issued in the Arab world was a standoff: Iraq had not provided the subversive democratic example that the established regimes had feared. The rulers in Damascus, Amman, Cairo, Riyadh, and far-off Tunis, Tripoli, and Algiers had ridden out the storm. No ruling regime had fallen, or had bent to the will of the opposition. In his own way, Bush had circled America's most important allies in the Arab world—the Egyptian regime and the Saudi monarchy. He had spoken of these regimes in code, but these two regimes had proven tenacious.

Mubarak had hunkered down, as is his way. He had hauled off to prison a man who had dared to contest Mubarak's writ, the democratic oppositionist Ayman Nour. Mubarak then made a lesson of one of Egypt's most celebrated academics, the sociologist Saad Ibrahim, imprisoning him on trumped up charges of corruption.

The security apparatus had effectively closed up the Egyptian political world. Mubarak was sly. He could draw on his country's reflexive aversion to foreign judgment and foreign intervention. He was the military ruler and he knew best. He was the Pasha on the Nile, and he still presented the United States with a dreaded alternative: his iron rule or the specter of the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power.

As for the House of Saud, a great oil bonanza, the oil markets had increased the self-confidence of the regime and its ability to stand up to American pressure. A vast infusion of wealth came Arabia's way between 2003 and 2010. A new monarch, Abdullah, who had been his brother's Crown Prince, stepped into the breach in 2005 in the aftermath of his brother's death. He could tranquilize the realm, as he kept the Americans at bay. He promised liberal reforms of his own, but then some \$1.2 trillion in oil revenues delivered the realm from its troubles. The obituaries of the Saudi realm have been repeatedly written by those who don't know its ways. The realm was never in danger. The Americans had little access to its inner workings.

The American enthusiasm for democracy in Arab lands had never been strong to begin with, and the Bush administration, in its final two years in office, began to lose faith in its own "freedom agenda."

In the Palestinian territories, an election in 2006 went the way of Hamas. It had not been a pretty choice: the gunmen of the secular Palestine Liberation Organization and their politics of banditry and corruption versus the Islamists of Hamas.

Palestinian politics had been poisoned by the cult of the gun, the ballot was not infallible, and the disillusionment with the entrenched ways of the Palestinian national autocracy had worked to the advantage of Hamas. The cause of democracy ought to have been big enough not to rest on the verdict of the "Palestinian street," but there was no denying the American disillusionment with what a democratic election had wrought.

All this would be trumped by America's own presidential elections of 2008. In the oddest of twists, the triumph of the Democratic Party, and its standard-bearer Barack Obama, was a boon for the Arab autocracies. No sooner had he come to power had President Obama sent forth the word that his predecessor's diplomacy of freedom would be abandoned.

Literally days into his presidency, on the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya television channel, the new steward of American power extended an olive branch to the powers-that-be in Arab and Islamic lands: America would live with the status quo. The ideological war against the rogue regimes in Damascus and Tehran would give way to a new effort to "engage" these regimes. The Wilsonianism unleashed on them by George W. Bush would be done and over with.

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This was nothing less than a reversal of the intellectual galaxy: a conservative American president had preached that Arabs did not have tyranny in their DNA, while his liberal successor, with fragments of Islam in his own personal background, proclaimed the ascendancy of *realpolitik* once again in America's conduct in that Greater Middle East.

Bush had, by necessity, embraced the example of Iraq. It had been his war, the defining act of his presidency. Obama put Iraq at a distance. He would, as President, venture there once, for a four-hour stop, on his way back from a two-day visit to Turkey. He would stay on an American base by the Baghdad airport. He and his national security advisors—his Vice President and his Secretary of State—hadn't seen anything stirring or noble in that Iraq venture. Meanwhile, the rulers in Riyadh and Cairo were now seen to be wise and old practitioners of power, and Washington would do its best to accommodate them.

It was Beirut, it should be recalled, that had given that false Arab spring its moment of brilliance. The Cedar Revolution had been the most stylish of revolts, its splendor perhaps reflective of the Mediterranean itself. It had been moved by outrage over the assassination of a former Prime Minister, "Mr. Lebanon" as he was called, Rafik Hariri.

He had been struck down in February 2005 by a massive car bomb in Beirut's hotel district by the sea. Needless to say, the Syrian occupiers of Lebanon were the prime suspects in his murder. The Lebanese had then risen, emboldened by the protective power of George W. Bush.

But soon this dream of a democratic Lebanon would be slain. The Syrian occupation forces had raced to the border in April of 2005. They would make a stealth return when they could see the retreat of American power and the loss of interest by the Obama Administration in the liberty of the Lebanese. Damascus would be courted by the new Obama administration in Washington. There would be the usual American tributes paid to Lebanon's sovereignty and independence, but no one was fooled. Lebanon had slipped out of the orbit of the Pax Americana.

Beirut had been the first home of the American missionaries who ventured into the Levant in the 1820s. It was in Beirut more than in any other Arab city where America's truth and ways had put down its roots. Its relegation to Syrian—and Iranian—hegemony by 2010 spoke volumes about the American despair over the ways of the Arabs.

For decades, it had been the norm in Arab intellectual and political circles to lament the bargain America had struck with the autocracies. For a fleeting moment, America had given freedom a try in the Arab lands. Then the political earth shifted again and the cause of democracy among the Arabs was up against the ways of the Arabs themselves—and the decision by the Americans that liberty does not grow on Arab soil.

A false modernity floats over the Arab world. But the states—primitive in their sources of power, both frightened and merciless at the same time—devour the green and the dry. Once upon a time, there had been a consoling distinction between the monarchies and the republics of the Arabs. Then the military officers and the coup-makers who had risen out of obscurity became kings in their own right. They cast about and they could only think of their sons as inheritors. The dynastic succession was pulled off in Damascus, and similar bids are in the offing, it is thought, in Egypt, Libya, Yemen. The line between monarchies and republics was thus erased.

The "dean of Arab rulers," the deranged Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, turned up in Italy in late 2009, and the Italians, dependent on his oil, had to humor him. At his request, an escort agency recruited, on the notice of a couple of hours, several hundred young women to come and meet with the man from the desert (he had brought his tent with him). The ruler had specified that the women should be between the ages of 18 and 35, with the minimum height of 5'7". They were there (of course) to discuss Islam with him, said Qaddafi. They were each given seventy to eighty Euros, a copy of the Quran, and of Qaddafi's gift to the world of letters and political analysis, his Green Book. He would repeat this charade with the Italian beauties a year later.

What Libyans thought of that must remain in the realm of conjecture. We never hear from them, the terror has snuffed out their culture. The Libyan ruler's Italian visit was a tale to put to shame the chronicles of the Thousand and One Nights.

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