

Spring Has Sprung, but the Middle East Remains a Muddle

BY GERALD E. MARSH

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THE ARAB SPRING was a dramatic result of a policy failure on the part of Arab countries. For many decades, they have used the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to divert the attention of their own citizens, the so-called "Arab Street," from their own economic and domestic failure to deliver a decent life to their people. Yet, in the end, the forces behind the Arab Spring had nothing to do with the Israelis and none of the participants blamed Israel. Nonetheless, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains far too valuable a tool for manipulating public opinion for Arab nations actually to allow a settlement to occur. This especially is true for Iran, but for different reasons. They have little to worry about since the political and ideological split of the Palestinian people between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority leaves no credible and trustworthy leadership with whom to negotiate. No comprehensive settlement is in the cards for years, if not decades, to come.

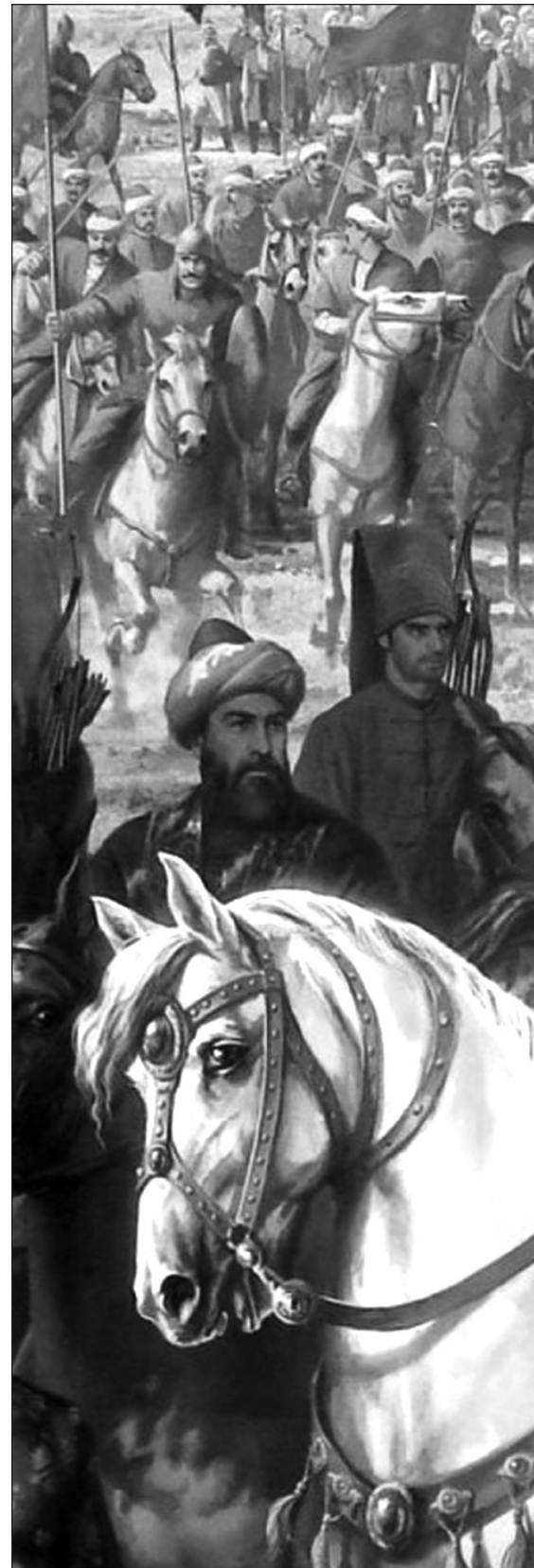
A key to understanding the current situation in the Middle East is to recognize that the primary identity of its people is not with the state, but rather with their religion, sect, tribe, and family. Following World War I, which ended some four centuries of Islamic Ottoman rule, Arab nationalism was imposed on the Middle

East by the colonial powers of the West. Under the Ottomans, the caliph ruled not only as a head of state, but as a sovereign who was the head of Sunni Islam.

Islamists believe that the modern failures of the Muslim world are a result of modernization following World War I and the imposition of nationalism. They believe that the greatness of the past can be had only by a return to a purely Islamic way of life—although they presumably also want to retain some of the benefits of modern technology, even if they reject the world view that led to their creation.

With the advent of the Arab Spring, Islamists are in ascension and are likely to rule much of the Middle East in the not so distant future. They already have come to the fore in Egypt and Tunisia and, as of this writing, probably soon will have a major influence in Syria. In Libya, the outcome remains unclear, although it does not bode well for the future that Qatar has been providing shipments of weapons to Abdel Hakim Belhai, who founded the now-disbanded Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which was listed by the U.S. State Department as a foreign terrorist organization.

Afghanistan and Pakistan also are likely to be taken over by Islamists not too long after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region.



While Mali and other parts of Africa are not in the Middle East, and therefore not part of the discussion here, there, too, the Islamists have become a major destructive and polarizing force.



Many Islamic extremists trace Muslim troubles to the fall of the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

If the nations coming under Islamic rule are poor, we can expect a religious and social structure not unlike that which is found in Pakistan or Afghanistan. If the nations are rich, usually from resource wealth, one has the model of the

Gulf states and especially Saudi Arabia where, as put by Michael Totten in *The New York Times*, “Religious edicts are crushingly enforced by state, mosque, and society [where] men have it rough, but women have it much

rougher. According to Wahhabi Islam, men must obey Allah and women must obey men.”

This form of intolerant Islam results in the Shia Muslims of the oil rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia being oppressed and rejected

as heretics. One also should remember that, after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan, it was Saudi-funded madrassas that led to the Taliban.

One of the key players today is the Muslim Brotherhood. It was founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna and generally is considered to be the most influential of all Islamic organizations. Worldwide, the Muslim Brotherhood claims to have a presence in some 80 countries. It especially is strong in parts of Europe. With the Arab Spring, it now has, for the first time, emerged publicly as a major political force in the Middle East. Hamas, established in 1987, has its origins in the Muslim Brotherhood and well could be considered its Palestinian chapter. Islamic Jihad, founded by Fathi Shaqaqi and other radical students in Egypt, also has roots in the Muslim Brotherhood and split from them in 1979. Shaqaqi was influenced by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. He believed the liberation of Palestine would unite the Arab and Muslim world into a single great Islamic state. While Islamic Jihad and Hamas advocate violence to form Islamic states, as well as the destruction of the state of Israel, the Muslim Brotherhood presents a far more moderate face to the world. The difference really is about means rather than ends.

At the heart of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology is the establishment of an Islamic state based on the Sharia in Egypt, as well as in the states where its many offshoots are based. Generally, it believes this is to be done first by becoming popular with the people through good works and social welfare programs, and second by creating a political party—at least where there are elections—since, once they have control of the state, society can be transformed by the implementation of Sharia law. This approach was advocated by Hassan al-Banna. The violent overthrow of governments, on the other hand, was advocated by Sayyid Qutb, the father of Islamic terrorism. He rose to prominence in the mid 1950s after he was arrested with the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qutb became the principal ideologue for modern Islamists. As put by Johannes Jansen in *The Dual Nature of Islamic Fundamentalism*, “He created a coherent ideology which has shown itself able to inspire many people to face their own death calmly for the sake of Islam, and to kill in its name.” Radical Islam dates from this time.

In the end, there is no real ideological split between al-Banna and Qutb—except the means of achieving their common goal. In particular—and the West should not be confused about this—both reject democracy, which they view as the rule of man over man rather than the rule of God through Sharia law. Democracy is an impiety. While in the Egyptian Brotherhood there are ideological fissures and some internal fragmentation in its organization, it has not, as a whole, renounced its core ideal of making Egypt an Islamic state.

It is crucial that one also understand the role of Iran and its proxy Hezbollah; the latter, in a sense, owes its existence to the state of Israel in

that it arose as a response to Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Explains Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, “When we entered Lebanon there was no Hezbollah. We were accepted with perfumed rice and roses by the Shia in the south. It was our presence there that created Hezbollah.”

Hezbollah was founded some time between 1982-85, the uncertainty due to the fact that, during this period, there was an amalgam of various Shi'ite extremists whose exact time of creation depends upon the sources consulted. Of course, this was the time, specifically Sept. 16-18, 1982, when the massacres at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps occurred. It often has been claimed that Israel was complicit in those massacres, but the reality is more nuanced. The massacres had more to do with sectarian divisions than Israel.

Grand plan gone awry

In 1996, Harry J. Lipkin, a physicist who splits his time between Argonne National Laboratory in Illinois and the Weizmann Institute of Science, located in Rehovot, Israel, explained in an e-mail to colleagues and friends what he believed occurred: “The turning point in the war was the assassination of Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel by Hafez al-Assad's agents, which completely destroyed Israel's Defense Minister Ariel Sharon's ‘grand plan.’ Sharon was completely unprepared and lost all control of the situation in which the massacre of Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila led to American intervention and American pressure forcing an Israeli withdrawal. I always found it peculiar that Israel alone should be blamed for this massacre. It was not carried out by Israelis, but by Lebanese forces. No one disputes that Israel was in control at the time, but there seemed to be a conspiracy of silence regarding the people who actually carried out the massacre. Their leader Elie Hobeika was not censured at all and later emerged in the Western press as a ‘moderate Lebanese Christian leader,’ with no reference to his past record of brutal massacres.”

Similar massacres described in other terms now are taking place in Syria, but whatever the means of killing, and whatever the political expediency dictating terminology, the root reasons are the same. Hafez al-Assad ordered the killing of some 20,000 people in Hama in February 1982 after he was told by the Syrian intelligence agency Mukhabarat that the Muslim Brotherhood had fomented an air force plot to overthrow his Alawite-led government.

Events in Syria today show that the son has learned the lessons of his father. The 1982 events in Hama were reported extensively by Thomas Friedman in *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. Hezbollah is based in the south of Lebanon with its primarily Shi'a population. Inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini, its forces were organized and trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, the premier force charged with, among other duties, responsibility for

Iran's missile forces and control of the Strait of Hormuz. While Hezbollah has international operations, our concern here will be with its role in the Middle East.

More recently, in the course of the Syrian 2012 civil war, Iran has been providing assistance to the Syrian government in the form of weapons and, according to *The New York Times*, its “paramilitary Quds force is sending trainers and advisors, sometimes disguised as religious pilgrims, tourists, and businessmen.”

These then are the principal parties: the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and, of course, the U.S. Syria also has a role in that Syria, under the minority ruling Alawites, an offshoot of Shi'ism, has served Iran as a trans-shipping point for weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon, including thousands of rockets—some being the Fajr-5, which have a range of close to 50 miles. Iraq, having a majority Shi'ite population, is a player in the sense that Iranian weapons are flown over Iraqi air space to Syria. Iraq has not complied with U.S. requests to have these flights inspected. While the primary interests of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas are the establishment of Islamic states, what are the strategic interests of Iran, Hezbollah, and the U.S.?

The history of Iran, and its relations with America since the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 by the intelligence agencies of the United Kingdom and the U.S., followed by the rule of Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi until his overthrow by the Islamic revolution in 1979, is well known. It therefore should come as no surprise that the primary interest of Iran is to deter the U.S. from constraining its influence in the area or attacking it directly. While Iran's interests primarily may appear to be local, they actually are global. Deterrence of the U.S. must rely on, at this time (and this could change) two options: threatening U.S. allies in the region or using pressure on Hezbollah to carry out terrorist strikes throughout the world. Iran also would like to protect its co-religionists throughout the region—where they often are discriminated against and considered heretics if not apostates—and perhaps its most important goal would be to be able to use the closure of the Strait of Hormuz as a credible threat against U.S. and European intervention.

Iran would like to control the flow of oil from the Gulf. While unlikely in the near term, one should keep in mind that about one-third of the population of the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia bordering the Gulf is Shi'ite; this minority has become restive in the past. The majority population in Bahrain is Shi'ite and is ruled over by minority Sunnis. The Arab Spring led to their violent repression and the intervention of Saudi troops. The Sunni rule in the Gulf is far more fragile than it appears.

Closure of the Strait of Hormuz is a threat that has been implicit in Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia and the U.S. for some time, but only recently has become explicit. From the Iranian point of view, however, long term closure is not credible currently since it knows the

U.S. would intervene. The threat, though, is not empty since it could lead to panic in the oil markets. The threat of conventional attack against American allies—Israel in particular—likely would ignite direct U.S. action. It is for this reason, and to counter the Israeli nuclear capability, that Iran is pursuing its nuclear weapons program. As once put by the Indian defense minister when asked what lessons could be drawn from the first Gulf War, “Don’t fight the United States unless you have nuclear weapons.”

In spite of Pres. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s offensive rhetoric, Israel would be a target for future Iranian nuclear weapons only because it is an important ally of the U.S. Israeli nuclear weapons are not feared by any of the countries in the region: they know full well that they would be employed only if Israel were threatened. That is why the last attempt to destroy Israel by the Arab countries was the Yom Kippur war of 1973 before Israel was fully nuclear capable. On the other hand, the Arab countries do not trust Iran and, should Iran succeed in its nuclear weapons program, it would engender many more nuclear weapons programs in these nations.

Iran not only has its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon, it has Hamas, and that is a bit of an enigma. Why would a Sunni offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood apparently be willing to represent Iranian Shi’ite interests? The answer is simple: wanting to preserve some semblance of impartiality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, neither Saudi Arabia, Qatar, nor Turkey (now headed by a “moderate” Islamic government) will ship arms to Gaza directly; Iran will and has done so for some time.

According to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, “Hours before Hamas strongman Ahmed Jabari was assassinated, he received the draft of a permanent truce agreement with Israel, which included mechanisms for maintaining the ceasefire in the case of a flare-up between Israel and the factions in the Gaza Strip.” It has been claimed that senior officials in Israel knew about this but nevertheless approved his assassination. If so, one might wonder whether some Israeli officials wanted the flare-up in Gaza to occur, and there is good reason to believe this might be the case.

In January 2009, Israeli jets “allegedly” attacked a weapons convoy in Sudanese territory. Apparently, the convoy of more than 20 trucks included Iranian Fajr-3 rockets with a range of around 50 kilometers. In October 2012, the Yarmouk weapons facility in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum was attacked because it was suspected that Iran was using it to stockpile and assemble anti-aircraft missiles, anti-tank weapons, and the longer-range Fajr-5 rockets capable of reaching Tel Aviv and Jerusalem from Gaza. Israel knew that many of the Fajr-5 rockets, weapons that were capable of changing the nature of the standoff with Hamas, had made it through to Gaza—nor could Egypt not have known about these shipments. As put by Ethan Bronner of *The New York Times*, “Israeli

officials said the movement of the Fajr-5 rockets through Egypt could not go unnoticed there, given their size. Each is 20 feet long and weighs more than 2,000 pounds—the warhead alone weighs 375 pounds—and the trucks carrying them across Egyptian bridges and through roadblocks into Sinai would be hard to miss.” The flare-up in Gaza gave Israel the justification to destroy many of these weapons.

The danger, of course, is the possibility that Hezbollah might open a second front in the north of the country and, unlike the Palestinians in Gaza, Hezbollah has, again according to Bronner, “thousands of rockets capable of striking Tel Aviv.” Although Hezbollah is a creature of Iran’s, and Iran certainly would like to see a northern front, it is quite reluctant to enter the Gaza conflict—as its re-supply route through Syria may be coming to an end with the fall of Bashar al Assad’s minority Alawite regime.

Given the funding and commitment of the Sunni Arab countries of the Gulf to the fall of Assad, and the movement of jihadists into Syria to support the Sunni insurgents, Syria is likely to fracture along sectarian lines and fall into a civil war even more bloody than the current one. If this spills over into Lebanon, Hezbollah well may need its weapons to guarantee its own survival—by deterring Israeli intervention—as well as for supporting the Shi’ites in the south of Lebanon.

U.S. policy questions

So, then, just what are the U.S.’s interests and policy in the region? If one is to believe John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt writing in the *London Review of Books* in 2006, “For the past several decades, and especially since the Six-Day War in 1967, the centrepiece of U.S. Middle Eastern policy has been its relationship with Israel. . . . The thrust of U.S. policy in the region derives almost entirely from domestic politics, and especially the activities of the ‘Israel Lobby,’” primarily through the activities of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Much has been written about this nonsense, but let me suggest here that, if domestic politics played a primary role in forming U.S. policy toward Israel, it would be through the lobbying of Evangelical Christians who, according to a Gallup poll, make up 46% of the population. Many of them believe that, once the Jews reoccupy all of their biblical lands, the legions of the Antichrist will attack, thus leading to the final conflict in the valley of Armageddon. AIPAC only wishes it were as influential as claimed by Mearsheimer and Walt.

The real fundamental U.S. interest in the region involves oil. Of course, domestic politics does play a role in U.S. interest in Israel, but more important is the fact that they are an advanced country that is the only democracy in the region. They also have the best intelligence about the Islamic world, particularly in the Middle East. While the Americans surely have

some assets on the ground, they cannot begin to compete with the Israelis. This, too, is a factor in our alliance.

The U.S. is the sole country capable of maintaining the free flow of oil throughout the world, and we—as well as much of the rest of the world—will continue to be dependent on oil for decades to come. There is no real alternative to oil in the transportation sector. We certainly can reduce the amount used through hybrids, electrification of parts of the transportation network, etc., but, in the end, we will remain dependent on this commodity for generations.

Most alternative solutions either are impractical or politically unacceptable. Solutions do exist, but present market structures cannot support the transition to these sources, which, in the short term, would require extensive capital investment and be far more expensive than continuing to rely on cheap oil, but we all should realize that the true cost of oil involves the military commitment to maintaining its worldwide free flow. That is one of the reasons the U.S. national security budget is close to one trillion dollars a year. The cost not only is in dollars, but in lives and the necessity of abiding by often unpalatable political constraints and alliances.

So, what should one conclude from all of this? It should be obvious that the greatest short-term threat to the stability of the Middle East and the free flow of oil is Iran succeeding in its nuclear weapons program. It already has orbited a satellite, thereby demonstrating its ability as a threat to most of Europe.

Another conclusion that jumps out is that energy policy must stop being an oxymoron. Over the next few decades, the U.S. must put into place an energy policy that transcends special interests and congressional gridlock. There are alternatives to oil in the transportation sector, but many are not yet ready for prime time. We must commit to long-term funding of promising technologies and have a program for capitalizing and bringing them to fruition.

Here is one final observation: the U.S. alone probably could solve its energy-related national security issues over the next few decades but, as the world population approaches the 9,000,000,000 mark (projected for 2050), there is no hope for a decent standard of living being met in much of the the rest of the world—unless it resolves its problem of poor governance and makes massive investments in food science and production, energy sources, and international regulatory structures. Our current social, economic, and political structures, domestically and globally, are incapable of meeting the challenge. ★

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