

In the Middle East, Tyranny May Give Way to Anarchy

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As the American foreign-policy establishment drools about "democracy," the U.S. position in the Middle East is collapsing. Its three legs are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. Two of those are disintegrating. One-legged stools make unstable seats.

The likelihood of any of the countries in the region becoming thriving, secular democracies is about equal to the probability we will balance the federal budget with bars of gold brought by flying monkeys. In the Middle East as in most of the world, the two options are tyranny and anarchy. When tyranny fails, anarchy moves in.

Establishment analysis perceives the possibility of disaster but does not grasp its potential dimensions. It sees the worst possible outcome as the rise of Islamic governments hostile to Israel, friendly to Iran, unwilling to cooperate with the United States in the "war on terror," and dismissive of such "universals" as feminist definitions of women's rights.

However, if we look at unfolding events through the lens provided by Fourth Generation war theory, a darker picture emerges. Fourth Generation theory says that what is at stake is the state itself.

Behind the events in the streets, the fundamental contest will be a war for legitimacy between non-state actors and the aspiring governments of states. As states all over the world become private preserves of a "new class" who use politics only to serve themselves, people are transferring their primary loyalty away from governments to a wide variety of other entities: religions and sects, races and ethnic groups, gangs, ideologies, and so on. For these new primary loyalties they are often eager to fight; this is especially true where there are large surpluses of young men with nothing else to do. Think of it as supply-side war.

From this perspective, the worst possible outcome of revolutionary events in the Middle East is the disintegration of states and their replacement either by statelessness—as we see in Somalia—or by fictional states, as in Iraq and Afghanistan. Within the territories that were formerly real states, power devolves to many non-state entities. Internally, war becomes a permanent condition, while externally there is no one with whom other states can deal. In the case of oil-producing areas, the flow becomes erratic at best.

What is the likelihood of such Fourth Generation outcomes? It differs place to place. Egypt has had a strong central government for some 5,000 years and will probably retain one. In Libya and Yemen, the state is fragile. Pakistan was a real state but is one no longer. Saudi Arabia is a riddle wrapped in an enigma. Iraq's fictional state could vanish with the rub of a lamp.

The states most likely to survive are those such as Syria and Iran where the government is openly anti-American. Here we see the price, most of it yet to be paid, of the folly of the Bush years. Where the quest is for legitimacy, nothing is more corrosive than being seen as the servant of a foreign power, especially one that is widely hated. Bush's invasion of Iraq and the endless war in Afghanistan made America into the "Great Satan" in the eyes of Muslims everywhere. At the same time, successive American administrations have openly given orders to our "allies" in the region and forced their compliance. We not only let the strings show, we painted them red, white, and blue. Now, in terms of legitimacy, America has the reverse Midas touch.

The foreign-policy establishment can grasp none of this because to do so it would have to see itself as others see it. Washington is a hall of mirrors.

What should our policy toward new entities in the Middle East be? If we understand we have the reverse Midas touch, we will also understand we should assume the lowest of profiles. First, remove the irritants. End the war in Afghanistan, close the American bases, shrink the embassies, and stop legitimizing Likud's expansionism. Then work to have what happens in the Middle East stay in the Middle East. Lower the profile of our relationship with Israel. Be careful whom we admit within our own borders, including as refugees. (There may be millions.) Reduce our dependence on imported oil by raising the gas tax and using the revenue to bring back passenger trains.

In short, come home and close the gate. Leave our good Muslim friends to wage jihad on one another.

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