

Violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa -- revisiting conditions and rethinking solutions

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VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: REVISITING CONDITIONS AND RETHINKING SOLUTIONS

中東・北アフリカ地域の暴力的過激主義:その条件と解決策の再考察

Housam Darwisheh*

今日の中東諸国において、エジプト、シリア、イラク、リビア、イエメン、アフガニスタン等、統治体制の困難を抱えている国々は地域的な暴力主義の温床となり、ニューヨーク、ロンドン、マドリッド、ジャカルタ、ニューデリー、パリ、ブリュッセルなどを標的にした国際テロリズムの震源となってきた。

これらの背景には社会的な極度の不平等・貧困の問題があるのであり、単に安全保障上の観点のみの対応策では体制の権威主義化を助長することで社会の矛盾を拡大させ、過激主義の拡大に資するだけである。

アラブ世界の諸国家はかつては過激な「アラブ民族主義」の主張で国民の支持を得てきたが、それらの一部は莫大な石油収入に頼ることで国民との正常な関係の構築に失敗し、少数の支配者層による権力の独占に終始してきた。

その結果として現在中東地域の若年層は、世界でも最も自らの社会経済から疎外され、抑圧された状況に置かれている。エジプト・イラクなどの各国では伝統的な農業生産の基盤が長期的に破壊され、食料の多くを輸入に頼るに至っている。域内の各国はこうした現状に対処するどころか全くの機能不全に陥っているのである。

さらに 2010 年末以降の短い「アラブの春」によって覚醒した若者の一部は、その後の政治状況の暗転のなかで「イスラーム国」などに流入し、アフマド・ダッラーウィーのように悲劇的な最期を迎えた例もある。

これまで米国の対中東政策は成功してきたとは言い難く、むしろ新たな紛争の火種となる社会の分裂と対立を助長することに終始してきた。その最終的な帰結ともいえる「イスラーム国」の問題を乗り越えるためには、軍事的な対抗手段に訴えるのではなく、経済成長と分配の平等、国民に開かれた民主的統治システムなど、まさに「アラブの春」で希求された理想の実現を図っていく以外にはあり得ない。

(文責・鈴木 均)

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The greatest source of security problems facing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) today is the prevalence of failed states¹ that lack the administrative and governing capacity to secure the integrity of their territories and ensure the safety of their people. In states like Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan, mass state violence and repression against society and extreme conditions of political turmoil have served to escalate political violence to historically unprecedented levels, with massive humanitarian consequences. More than that, the violence bred in various failed states of MENA is no longer confined to the “national terrain”; it has spread to other regions and countries, as has been shown by the attacks on targets in New York, London, Madrid, Jakarta, New Delhi, Paris, and Brussels.

This essay argues for an understanding of terrorism as a sociopolitical phenomenon that is closely correlated with regime/state violence. Moreover, terrorism is also being used by regimes to legitimize state violence and label any political opposition as unpardonable terrorist acts. Thus, this essay proposes that terrorism cannot be tackled primarily by security-based responses and military tactics. On the one hand, such responses to terrorism create a fertile environment for the spread of violent extremist groups. On the other hand, they allow brutally repressive authoritarian regimes to remain in power by capitalizing on their people’s abhorrence of instability and insecurity, and on Western fears of violent extremists to justify their use of brutal force. To that extent, security measures and military tactics alone will not address the roots of politically motivated violence, namely, the unbearably harsh political and socioeconomic conditions in the MENA region. On the contrary, by continuing to provide military, political, and financial support for ruthless regimes in MENA, international powers contribute to exacerbating the already grim socioeconomic and political conditions that foster terrorism in the first place. As long as international powers persist with their present approaches, they will themselves be perceived as threats and obstacles to the attainment of popular socioeconomic and political aspirations.

Furthermore, support for authoritarian regimes inhibits the rise of legitimate political authority, thereby deepening the chaos that is exploited by terrorism. What is needed, and needed quickly, is a paradigm shift in counter-extremist approaches towards the formulation and implementation of long-term policies that prioritize human rights, civil liberties, economic improvement, and institutional reforms – exactly the kinds of popular demands raised by the ordinary local people of MENA during the so-called Arab Spring. Only with such shift in understanding the underlying causes of terrorism can diplomatic engagement help to steer intra-regional competition in MENA along peaceful channels, and away from sectarian paths that work to the advantage of authoritarian regimes, militants, as well as regional and international powers.

¹ Lynch, Mark. November, 2016. “Failed States and Ungoverned Spaces,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 688: 24-35.

I. Authoritarianism and extremism

In the 1950s and 1960s, authoritarian Arab rulers established radical nationalist regimes as a means of consolidating their power and controlling their people. The rulers built strong state apparatuses, installed powerful security services, prohibited political pluralism, controlled the media, and nationalized key economic sectors. Arab dictators capitalized on their radical nationalist, populist, and economic policies to mobilize the people and shore up their legitimacy.² These policies, variously packaged in the name of “Arab Nationalism” or “Arab Socialism,” appeared to form a populist social contract by which the state and regime would take charge of development, meet the basic needs of citizens, secure political independence, and advance other national aspirations.³ Bolstered by oil revenues, remittances, loans, and different forms of economic and military assistance, Arab regimes achieved their goals to some extent. In the long run, however, most regimes failed to maintain the social contract that traded political acquiescence for socioeconomic welfare. In most of the Arab countries, both the public and private sectors stuttered and were stifled by nepotism, cronyism, corruption, and an apparent lack of the rule of law.⁴ When faced with popular disaffection, the regimes opted for repression and mass killings when they should have chosen substantive political and economic reforms that might have facilitated the large-scale entry of youths into the labor market and the emergence of an inclusive and internally stable political system. According to the UN International Labor Organization (ILO), youth unemployment in the Arab region, which has a disproportionately large share of young people, is the highest in the world, exposing skewed economic policies, social justice deficit, and over twenty years of poorly managed economic liberalization.⁵ Thus, the Middle East population now has some of the world’s highest percentages of youth who are virtually shut out of the political and economic spheres and, therefore, harbor deep feelings of frustration and social exclusion.

The oil and gas resources of the Middle East alone could have made MENA one of wealthiest regions of the world. Instead, despite being so abundantly rich in agriculture, extensive and long-term economic failures and rampant corruption have

² Gasiorowski, Mark. 2014. “Introduction: Middle Eastern and North African States in Comparative Perspectives,” in Mark Gasiorowski (ed.) *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, Seventh Edition, Westview Press, USA.

³ Ibrahim, Saad Eddin. 1995. “Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: An Overview,” in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble (ed.) *Political liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 36.

⁴ The World Bank, *Unlocking the Employment Potential in the Middle East and North Africa: Toward a New Social Contract* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2003); The World Bank, *Better Governance for Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Enhancing Inclusiveness and Accountability* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2003).

⁵ *Al-Arabiya News*, February 6, 2013 (<https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/06/264749.html>); Driouchi, Ahmed. 2014. *Knowledge-Based Economic Policy Development in the Arab World*, USA: Business Science Reference.

turned it into a region that can barely feed itself.⁶ In the recent past, Egypt and Iraq were the potential breadbaskets of the region, but mismanagement, underinvestment, and counterproductive price distortions have ruined their agricultural sectors. In addition, the trade liberalization programs forced by the IMF and World Bank have undermined or discouraged state and private investment in the agricultural sectors.⁷ After being almost self-sufficient in wheat in the 1960s,⁸ for example, Egypt, one of the largest food importers in the world, is now a net importer of more than half of its total intake of wheat.⁹ The Arab world stands at the top of the world rankings in terms of food and nutrition insecurity principally because of the region's high dependence on food imports for consumption, water scarcity, its vulnerability to climate change, and prevalence of poverty and social instability.

There is, in short, a severe organic crisis in MENA that inflicts great insecurity on practically all spheres of life. Not since the end of colonial rule has the region sunk to such low levels of human, institutional, and socioeconomic developments and such endemic extents of corruption.¹⁰ By preventing citizens from being meaningfully involved in the governing process, the political system undermines their sense of belonging. Most people in the MENA do not view their state institutions as being neutral or legitimate because their regimes not only tightly control the legislature, the judiciary, and the mass media but also manipulate elections and mismanage public funds. In other words, the system is bankrupt – it is dismantled by dictators who replaced governmental legitimacy with cults of personality. As it became mired in crises, the region lacked basic institutional frameworks that could mediate between the rulers and the ruled. One outcome of this institutional void, so to speak, was the emergence of non-state actors and groups who proffer wholly different visions and ideas of political, economic, security, and humanitarian projects.

II. Subversions and blowbacks before and after the “Arab Spring”

Between 2010 and 2011, millions of people took to the streets to demand change and an end to authoritarian rule. Their demands were expressed in universal terms: justice, freedom, and dignity. No group among the dissidents called for an “Islamic State.” All wanted to seize the state back from the typical Arab “President for Life.” However, the Arab “spring” has yielded to a long dark winter as the movements for

⁶ Kamrava, Mehran & Babar, Zahra. 2012. “Food Security and Food Sovereignty in the Middle East,” CIRS Summary Report (6): Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar.

⁷ Pace, Michelle & Cavatorta, Francesco. 2012. “The Arab Uprisings in Theoretical Perspective – An Introduction” *Mediterranean Politics*, 17 (2): 125-138.

⁸ Hanieh, Adam. 2013. *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, IL.

⁹ Egypt: Wheat Sector Review. 2015. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAO Investment Center: (<http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4898e.pdf>).

¹⁰ “Arab Human Development Report 2016,” *United Nations Development Program*: (<http://www.arab-hdr.org>).

reform were suppressed by the old regimes, subverted by counter-revolutionary regional powers, and even undermined by regional and international actors such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, the US, the EU, and Russia. What began, and should have been widely supported, as a regional advance towards democratization, was aborted. In its wake came a sickening deterioration in humanitarian, security, and economic conditions that framed the context for a *surge* in state violence, violent extremism, and non-state militancy.

What role did the US play in the unfolding descent into chaos? The US has long supported authoritarian regimes in MENA to retain its influence over the region and its resources. The strategy of the US linked “stability” with “security” – the police and military-enforced stability of its client security states in MENA. The close relationships between the authoritarian regimes in MENA and the Western powers hampered popular moves for democratization. The 2011 uprising in Egypt and its aftermath provided a clear example. Egypt had its first democratically elected government in 2012. Its first civilian president served for only a year before the military deposed him in a coup, using popular mobilization against the civilian government as the pretext for bloodily restoring a military dictatorship. Not only did the “pro-democracy” Western powers not intervene against the Egyptian military, but the same powers, led by the Obama administration, declined even to call the coup a *coup* so as to preempt any curtailment of military assistance to the Sisi regime¹¹ that went on to rule with much more brutal repression and extensive human rights violation. International support is crucial for the security establishment of most authoritarian regimes and their capacity to hold on to power. One can only recall the example of Eastern Europe where the withdrawal of the Soviet Union’s support ended the coercive backbone of Eastern European regimes. Also in Latin America, the United States’ shift away from supporting authoritarianism after the Cold War dealt many regimes an existential blow.¹²

All this, one might say, formed the background to the story of Ahmad Darrawi, a young and idealistic Egyptian who helped to lead the Tahrir Square protests in 2011, and ran for Parliament in 2012 under the slogan, “Dignity and Security,” only to die three years later as an Islamic State fighter in Iraq.¹³ Darrawi’s story is tragic in more ways than one, but it is illustrative that he and many other “militants” and “extremists” of his generation were the social products of authoritarian rule abetted by cynical external intervention. Hundreds of thousands of youths in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere are graduates from the prisons and torture chambers of their autocrats. For

11 Pressman, Jeremy. 2016. “US Policy after the Uprisings: Alliances, Democracy, and Force,” in Mark L. Haas and David Lesch (eds), *The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprisings*, Westview Press, page 277.

12 Bellin, Eva. 2004. “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective,” *Comparatives Politics*, 36 (2): 139-157, page 144.

13 Worth, Robert. F. April 7, 2016. “The Democracy Activist Who Became A Suicide Bomber,” *The Wall Street Journal*, (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-democracy-activist-who-became-a-suicide-bomber-1460048520>).

them, Sisi's coup and his regime's bloody suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition forces in Egypt proved the futility of peaceful struggles for change through standard political mechanisms.

By now, it would be apparent to most that US interference and intervention on behalf of anti-democratic regimes have engendered popular hatred that may well undermine the long-term security interests of the US. One has just to recall the well-known CIA intervention in overthrowing the democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953¹⁴ that killed any chances for Iran developing into a democratic society, and planted the seeds for anti-American sentiments across the Middle East. Later, the Iranian people overthrew the Shah and installed the Islamic Republic in 1979. In more recent times, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and his brutal regime did not lead to a "better world," but eventually paved the way for the "Islamic State."

In short, external intervention – military and otherwise – has not ceased after the Cold War but has even extended to Kuwait, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, and the memories of their repercussions have not been erased among the people of MENA. To take another instance, the present Sunni-Shi'a conflicts largely emerged out of a destabilized Iraq. There, between 2003 and 2006, the occupation force of the US imposed a dysfunctional sectarian distribution of power that precipitated a civil war between Sunni and Shi'a Iraqis, which in turn aggravated the "Sunni-Shi'a" regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Tens of thousands of young Muslims flooded to Iraq to fight the US occupation of Iraq, just as their predecessors had fought the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan. If the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan spawned a transnational professional jihadist organization such as al-Qaeda, the post-2001 anti-US insurgency of the Taliban and the invasion of Iraq paved the way for al-Qaeda spin-off militants to pursue their dream of building and governing their own "Islamic State."

There is a useful lesson to be learned even from this turmoil. In Iraq from 2006 to 2007, the Americans took measures to incorporate the Sunni into the newly invented but Shi'a-dominated political system. The inclusion of the Sunni had one notable outcome: it encouraged a Sunni revolt against Al-Qaeda – now the "Islamic State" – in Iraq. By 2011, Al-Qaeda was on the verge of collapse, having lost its base in the Sunni lands in Iraq. Subsequently, though, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, fearing Sunni influence after Al-Qaeda's defeat, alienated the Sunni in Iraq with his authoritarian and sectarian policies. With the advent of the Arab Spring, Maliki opportunistically declared Sunni protestors against his policies as "terrorists" and brutally repressed them.¹⁵ Maliki's policies marginalized the Sunnis, left them with no incentive to stay within the system, and pushed more militants into the arms of ISIS.

¹⁴ Bryne, Malcolm. August 19, 2013. "CIA Admits it was Behind Iran's Coup," *Foreign Policy*: (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/19/cia-admits-it-was-behind-irans-coup/>).

¹⁵ Al-Marashi, Ibrahim. 2017. "Iraq and the Arab Spring: From Protests to the Rise of ISIS," in Mark L. Haas, David Lesch (eds), *The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprisings*, Westview Press, page 154.

III. Is there a way out?

Today, ISIS may be the most fearsome organization in MENA. Still, it did not create the region's wars. Instead, ISIS is itself the product of dehumanizing conditions: economic collapse, tyranny and repression, nepotism and corruption, and the cynicism of Western foreign policies that rhetorically promote democracy but shy away from supporting democratic principles in practice.¹⁶ Conflicts, especially in Syria, and Western military invasions destroyed legitimate authority, and created a power vacuum which ISIS exploited while offering a vision of an "Islamic State" that promises to replace the status quo. To that degree, ISIS is a revolt against an international system that has abetted a most wretched treatment of the societies of MENA. Critical examination of the conditions that bred terrorism must precede the formulation of long-term policies and strategies that can defeat it while bringing improvement to the region. The goal of efforts to resolve the current impasse in MENA could be a concerted international effort to rebuild the region's shattered states. This should not be taken as a license to conduct an open-ended "war on terror." On the contrary, this calls for social and political struggle, not heightened military adventure. Calls for tougher, wider, or deeper military responses overlook the unspeakable suffering of the local population resulting from internal repression and external assaults. Only brutal authoritarian regimes and violent extremist groups such as ISIS truly benefit from ceaseless violence in the forms of direct invasions, stealthy bombardments, and "proxy wars." If ISIS has had a wide appeal, it is less because of its uncompromising religiosity. Rather, it covers its violent actions with the "legitimacy" that comes from (successfully) fighting ruthless regimes and foreign invaders. In the long term, efforts to root out groups like ISIS must be accompanied by earnest measures to replace repressive authoritarian regimes. For both to succeed, the time-tested prerequisites for political stability and the absence of chaos must be met: economic growth, equitable distribution, inclusive modes of representation, good governance, and clean government – in a word, "freedom, justice, and development," the common call of the Arab Spring.

¹⁶ Abdel Samei, Marwa Fikri. April 5, 2015. "US Arms Hypocrisy in Egypt, Obama's New Beginnings that Never Started," *Informed Comment* (<http://www.juancole.com/2015/04/hypocrisy-beginning-started.html>).