

Islam and Democracy in the Context of the 'Arab Spring'

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Introduction

In the hours of media reporting on the 'Arab Spring,' in the time of strength where protesters remained (and in many cases are remaining) defiant against leaders who have gripped onto power in the Middle East and North Africa, in the celebration that occurred after Zine Abedine Ben Ali (Tunisia) and Hosni Mubarak (Egypt) resigned from office, one point that seemed to be lost in this series of events was the argument that the lack of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa was due to its "incompatibility" with Islam. Yet, this discussion surrounding the compatibility of Islam and democracy has been highly prevalent particularly since the September 11th, 2001 terror attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon building in the United States (Ahmed, 2003). It was during this time that scholars, media pundits, and policymakers have debated whether democracy can exist in the 'Muslim World'. But while this argument has taken center stage in recent years, arguments regarding the relationship between Islam with democracy have existed well before the terror attacks on September 11th, 2001, where some have suggested that "...the most important questions revolve around the compatibility of Islam and democracy and the role of new-style movements in the political evolution of Muslim societies" (Esposito & Voll, 1996: 7).

This paper aims to examine the debate regarding Islam and democracy within the framework of the recent events in the Middle East and North Africa. In this paper, we will begin by reviewing theoretical support for democracy in Islam, as well as examine support for democracy within the framework of Islam and Islamic history. Next, we will review the empirical support for democracy in Muslim-majority societies. We will then review the recent protests in North Africa and the Middle East in relationship to this debate.

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Finding that millions of individuals throughout these Muslim-majority states are fully supportive of the idea of democracy, we examine other reasons for a lack of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa that includes authoritarian leaders unwilling to promote human rights and democratic reform, as well as the actions of ‘Western’ and non-Western leaders unwilling to wholeheartedly back the protesters against the authoritarian regimes. Finally, we will conclude with a summary of the main points.

Islam and Democracy

In the discussion of the relationship between Islam and democracy, several arguments have been put forward that suggest that Islam cannot coincide with democracy. For example, Huntington (1993) argues not only that “Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations” (40), but also that “Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, property, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist, or Orthodox cultures” (40). In terms of Islam, Huntington (1993, 1996) goes as far as to say that “clashes” between “Islamic” and “Western” civilizations exist. Esposito & Piscatori (1991) explain that even some Muslim religious leaders have been quick to suggest that Islam and democracy cannot exist together. However, despite such arguments, the principles of democracy are present within all societies (Esposito & Voll, 1996). Speaking of this point, Esposito & Voll (1996) argue that

“People who formally and publically oppose democracy or who are willing to describe their programs as nondemocratic usually represent a marginal sect or group on the extreme of the religio-political spectrum... There are other, more mainstream groups that reject the term “democracy” as a foreign term that is not applicable within their tradition or society because there are other more appropriate, indigenous conceptualizations for describing the rights of popular participation and freedom. However, most politically conscious people around the globe express their aspirations for political participation, freedom, and equality in terms of “democracy” (11-12).

Examining democracy specifically within the context of Islam, a number of principles exist within the faith that echo characteristics of democracy. For example, in early Islamic

history, emphasis was placed on the importance of *shura* (consultation) between leaders and their citizens (Esposito & Voll, 1996, El Fadl, 2004). El Fadl (2004) explains that “[t]he Quran instructs the Prophet to consult regularly with Muslims on all significant matters and indicates that a society that conducts its affairs through some form of deliberative process is considered praiseworthy in the eyes of God (3:159, 42:38)” (16). He goes on to explain that Muhammad often made a point of consulting the community (El Fadl, 2004: 17). This idea is similar to the idea of a leader listening to her/his citizens’ concerns either through meeting with them, and can be applicable to new technologies such as email, etc... It is this notion of *shura* that Islam emphasizes that is consistent with notions of democracy.

This notion of *shura* or consultation is important in the discussion of Islam and democracy. Prophet Muhammad himself emphasized that his opinions on non-religious affairs were not divinely inspired, thus allowing citizens to question his opinions. Furthermore, Muhammad did not emphasize a political leader to follow him upon his death. Now while debate has existed as to why this was the case, many emphasize that the Quran’s message is not focused on “a particular form of government” (El Fadl, 2004: 5), but rather “does identify a set of social and political values that are central to a Muslim polity...[which are]...pursuing justice through social cooperation and mutual assistance...; establishing a nonautocratic, consultative method of governance; and institutionalizing mercy and compassion in social interactions...(El Fadl, 2004: 5).

After the Prophet Muhammad, the next leader of the Muslim community at the time—Abu Bakr—upon establishing himself in the leadership position emphasized the importance of listening to those living in the community, as well as promoting the idea of a just ruler. These points were clearly emphasized when Abu Bakr, speaking to the community of Muslims during his “inaugural address” (Afsaruddin, 2008: 20), according to one reference¹, said: “You must be Godfearing, for piety is the most intelligent practice and immorality is the most foolish. Indeed I am a follower, not an innovator: If I perform well, then help me, and if I should deviate, correct me...” (Afsaruddin, 2008: 21). Clearly, this language indicates an openness and willingness to allow others not only to disagree, but also to criticize Abu Bakr in any decisions that he makes. This example is important, as it allows one to see further

¹ Afsaruddin (2008) explains that this quotation is taken from “*Risalat al- ‘Uthmaniyya*” “The Treatise of the ‘Uthmaniyya”) by “Amr ibn Bahr al-Jahiz (21).

evidence to suggest that in early Islamic history, evidence existed to suggest that leaders' policies could be challenged.

And even more than this, the way that Abu Bakr (as well as the later 'righteously guided caliphs') were selected was not based on family relations or income, but rather on their religious knowledge and level of "moral excellence" (Afsaruddin, 2008: 21). This is a further evidence against any notion of a leader taking power because he has some blood relation to an influential figure in Islam. We see that Abu Bakr, continuing his inaugural message, spoke out against such thinking of political power through lineage or clan by saying:

"O gathering of Helpers, if this matter [sc. the caliphate] is deserved on account of inherited merit and attained on account of kinship, then the Quraysh is more noble than you on account of inherited merit and more closely related than you [to the Prophet]^[2]. However, since it is deserved on account of moral excellence in religion, then those who are foremost in precedence from among the Emigrants are placed ahead of you in the entire Qur'an as being more worthy of it compared to you" (Afsaruddin, 2008: 21).

In fact, one would have to challenge any idea that suggested being related to Muhammad, or coming from a particular family should give anyone any sort of political credibility in terms of leadership. Yet, we see these same exact arguments being used by authoritarian leaders in the Middle East. In just one example, we see the notion of lineage from Muhammad as a key point in the control of power by the Monarchy in Morocco. Part of the title "Commander of the Faithful" is this connection to the notion that the family (and current leader of Mohammad VI) are descendents from Mohammad. However, examining the statements of Abu Bakr and the early Muslims, there is no support for this sort of thinking. Therefore, it is evident that *shura* "...certainly did not refer merely to a ruler's solicitation of opinions from notables in society; it signified, more broadly, resistance to autocracy, government by force, or opposition" (El Fadl, 2004: 17).

In addition to the idea of consultation, early Muslim leaders have emphasized the notion of *ijma*, or consensus within the community. The idea of consensus suggests that a group of people (more than one leader) is expected to come to a similar agreement about a particular issue. This takes further power away from the individual leader. Esposito &

² Muhammad was a member of the Quraysh.

Piscatori (1981) explain that some interpretations of Islam, such as the arguments of Muhammad Asad, emphasized the importance of consensus, and specifically a “legislative assembly--...*majlis ash-shura*” (434) (of elected officials) who would then participate in the process of governing with the goal of consensus (434-435).

Another concept to support notions of democracy within an Islamic framework is the idea of “*bay’a*” or allegiance to a leader, even if this has not always been practiced in Muslim societies after Muhammad (Al-Suwaidi, 1995). Since Islam does not advocate a particular political system, some see this as a positive fact since the argument is that Muhammad purposely did not select a leader to follow him so that the Muslim community could make this decision. The concept of *bay’a* echoes democracy as an individual is expected to gain the support of the community in order to establish leadership.

Furthermore, Muslims, through the concept of *ijtihad* (or personal interpretation), are able to interpret their faith according to their own positions. This gives the individual a voice in daily affairs, including religious interpretation (El Fadl, 2004). This is important because of a concern by some that Islam prescribes a set of laws (*Shariah*) that all adherents have to abide by. And within this, the concern is that *Shariah* is counter to any idea of democracy. However, part of the idea of *Shariah* (which itself is not crystallized, or all contained within the Quran) is that individuals have the ability to interpret the faith (El-Fadl, 2004). This is applicable to democracy as it has allowed Muslims, through *ijtihad* organizations to “[conduct] research and [engage] in advocacy on behalf of Muslim civil society” (Hashish, 2010: 76).

So regarding the goals for a democratic system (as a range of scholars have called for), the expectation is that the specific political system is not only ‘democratic’ in that individuals can vote, but what is actually needed—within the concept of Islam—is the expectation of a democracy where the principles of *adl* (justice) are present, and thus “where people can vote their leaders in and out [off office] and hold them accountable” (Ahmed, 2000: 104). Thus, the key is to find what system best provides support for justice (Ahmed, 2000; El Fadl, 2004) and human rights (El Fadl, 2004). And because democracy best emphasizes these ideas (El Fadl, 2004), this political structure is not only compatible, but needed (El Fadl, 2004).

The Empirical Support for Muslims and Democracy

Stepan and Robertson (2003) have analyzed the historical levels of democracy in the 'Muslim World.' In their study, they examine the years of democracy in non-Arab Muslim states, as well as Arab Muslim-majority states, and also look at the years of democratic governance (defined by fair elections) that have existed in all of these cases. Then, they control for GDP per capita, arguing that GDP is one of the best predictors of democracy, and that countries with low GDP per capita are not expected to have a democracy, whereas states with high GDP per capita are expected to be a democracy (Stepan & Robertson, 2003). When taking into account GDP as it relates to expectations of democracy, they found that many non-Arab Muslim majority states not only should have not had democracy (because of a low GDP per capita), but seven non-Arab Muslim majority states "overachieved." And while we saw a lack of democracy in the Arab Muslim majority states, with many "underachievers," one has to consider a number of factors for this, including but not limited the use of oil rents.³

In addition, it has been pointed out that over one-half of the world's Muslim population lives in a democratic state (Stepan, 2007). Now of course these numbers do not suggest that all Muslims either support (or not support) democracy, or that all Muslims have a unified position on political systems. However, these figures are important to at least briefly mention in that they allow us to see just how many Muslims do live their lives in a democratic society. Therefore, the theoretical support and desire for democracy in Muslim majority states exists. Furthermore, we find that democracy is a part of the daily lives of millions of Muslims around the world. And so it so many Muslims live in a democratic state, and if Islam itself calls for a system of justice (Ahmed, 2000) and rights (El Fadl, 2004) of which a democracy may be the system to best support such idea, then other factors must be at play in non-democratic in the 'Muslim World.' Yet despite the theoretical support for Islam and democracy, a number of Middle East and North African states have authoritarian leaders in power. Because of the lack of democracy in much of the region, many are quick to associate Islam (because the faith is the most predominant religion in the region) as the main factor for the lack of democracy. However, upon examination, one finds that a number of factors, including but not limited to the lack of accountability of leaders towards their citizens, as well as outside support by major power states have been critical factors towards the lack of democracy that exists. We shall now turn to examine factors that have inhibited the expansion

³ For example, Smith (2004) has found that increased oil resources have led to longer periods of authoritarian rule. The belief is that leaders of oil-rich states are able to use the economic rents to hold power by distributing the profits to any potential challengers.

of democratic political structures in Muslim-majority states in the Middle East and North Africa.

Colonialism, Authoritarianism, and Outside Support

In order to understand the history of authoritarianism in the region, one must begin with the political events during the time of colonialism. The influence of outside states (namely Britain and France) in the Middle East became clear starting in the early 1800s, and lasting at least until post ‘WWII’ were many of the nationalist movements pushed these European powers outside of their respective territory. During this time, the Ottoman Empire controlled much of the Middle East and North Africa. However, as trade increased with Britain and France—and the Ottoman Empire began a “transformation” (Cleveland & Bunton, 2008) in power, European states, through capitulation (or favored trade) agreements with the Ottoman Empire, began to gain more influence in the region. This became more pronounced as leaders within the Ottoman Empire began to acquire credit from Europe to finance particular projects. It was these actions, combined with domestic instability and a decrease in military power that resulted in a decline of the Ottoman Empire (Cleveland & Bunton, 2008). The end of the Ottoman came about at the end of ‘WWI’ when Britain, France and Russia defeated Germany and the Ottoman Empire.

It was the actions of outside states at this time that has had long-term consequences in the Middle East and North Africa. Along with interests in the region for materials such as water, gold (Collins, 2008), and the Suez Canal prior to ‘WWI’ (Cleveland & Bunton, 2008; Collins, 2008), one of the key actions that set the political stage in the Middle East was the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which was established between Britain and France while ‘WWI’ was still taking place (Cleveland & Bunton, 2008). This agreement divided the territories in the Middle East, with Britain controlling Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine, and France having control over the territories of Syria and Lebanon (Cleveland & Bunton, 2008). From this point, both Britain and France attempted to suppress any anti-colonialist movements that were to develop. They would attempt to do this through the use of violence, or helping install local leaders who were sympathetic to the interests of the colonial powers. Such actions were taking place well into the 1940s and 1950s (Cleveland & Bunton).

However, some may question whether the actions during the time of colonialism in fact have any current relevance to the lack of democracy in the Middle East today. But upon examination of the political events following ‘WWII,’ it becomes clear that the then new Superpowers (the United States and the USSR) also began to exert their influence in the Middle East. Speaking on the influence of outside actors, and the effect that this had on possible democratic movements, Akbar Ahmed (2007) explains that the

“pressures of the cold war forced [leaders] to choose between either socialist or capitalist camps. Joining one or the other camp brought aid, weapons, and international standing but also led to a dependence on the source of this support and a lack of accountability to the state’s citizenry. The resulting repressive regimes precluded the development of genuinely Muslim societies” (224).

A number of events support this claim. For example, Britain and France (along with Israel) attacked Egypt after Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal (which infuriated Britain and France, who at the time had control of the canal) (Cleveland & Bunton, 2008). In addition to the attack on Egypt during the Suez Canal Crisis, the US and British support of the Shah in Iran further highlighted the point that outside states had an interest in supporting non-democratic leaders who whose interests aligned with their own. In the case of Iran, the US and Britain went as far as carrying out a coup against Mohammad Mossadeq in Iran in order to help the Shah return to power. And when the Shah was the head political figure in Iran, the United States made numerous weapons available to the authoritarian leadership (Cleveland & Bunton, 2008).

Yet despite the numerous historical cases of outside interest in the Middle East, we need to look no further than the actions of some ‘Western’ states during the recent ‘Arab Spring’ to more completely understand how powerful international actors have an interest in ensuring that particular leaders—who in many of these instances are authoritarian—stay in power. While we could look at numerous country cases as evidence, for this paper, we will look at the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria.

Tunisia

The initial protests of late 2010 and early 2011 in North Africa and the Middle East began in Tunisia. The protests were initiated after Mohammad Bouazizi set himself on fire after a Tunisian police authority told him that he was unable to set up his fruit-stand. This event then set off a chain of protests in Tunisia calling for Zine Abedine Ben Ali to step down from office. After Ben Ali resigned from the Presidency on January 15th, 2011, many heralded this event and ability for citizens to remove a leader from power--in the name of human rights--without violence. In terms of international support, a number of leaders spoke out positively in regards to the protests against the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali, whose regime committed a number of human rights violations that included the inability of political parties to form, the formation of secret police, requirements of voting cards (and their use in ensuring political power), and accusations of torture (Sadiki, 2002, 2008; Kaucsh, 2009). This was the same government who is reported to have had one of the worst records on civil and political rights, along with being involved in mass corruption.

Thus despite the pattern of human rights violations against Tunisians during the regime of Ben Ali, many have been far from critical towards the regime. For example, in a 2010 World Bank Country Brief, Tunisia was described as being "...far ahead in terms of government, effectiveness, rule of law, control of corruption and regulatory quality" (Khalaf, Daneshkhu, & Thompson, 2011). Furthermore, many have been upset specifically with Western 'developed' states such as France, the former colonial power in Tunisia for their lack of criticism against Ben Ali during the early protests (Al-Jazeera, 2011b), which became evident while the protests were taking place in Tunisia. For example, a Guardian (Traynor & Willsher, 2011) report explains that "...days before the Tunisian dictator fled to Saudi Arabia..., the French foreign Minister, Michele Alliot-Marie, outraged liberals and human rights activists by proposing to dispatch French security forces to Tunis to shore up the unpopular regime." Alliot-Marie suggested that France provide "knowhow" for Ben Ali situation (Chrisafis, 2011) so that he could "appease the situation through law enforcement techniques" (Al Jazeera, 2011b). In their report, Traynor & Willsher continue to explain the detailed relationship between France and Tunisia by saying:

"Sarkoszy was made an honorary citizen in Tunis in 2009 and praised the Ben Ali government for expanding liberties in Tunisia. His culture minister, Frederic Mitterrand, conferred on him by Ben Ali, said...that Tunisia was

being unfairly criticized: “To say that Tunisia is a one-man dictatorship seems to me quite exaggerated” (Traynor & Willsher, 2011).

Khalaf, Daneshkhu, and Thompson of the Financial Times (2011), cited a 2008 quote by Sarkozy speaking about Ben Ali, when he said: “[c]ertainly not everything is perfect in Tunisia. Not everything is perfect in France either...but...what country can be proud of having advanced in a half century on the path of progress, on the path of tolerance, and on a path of reason?”

However, this support for Ben Ali has not come just from Sarkozy and other members of the current government, but in fact, this has existed in France years before Sarkozy. For example, Khalaf, Daneshkhu, and Thompson of the Financial Times (2011) explain that “[t]he most memorable expressions of international backing came from Jacques Chirac, the former French president, who had spoken of the Tunisian “economic” miracle” and insisted on praising the regime’s human rights record because “the most important human rights are the rights to be fed, to have health, to be educated and to be housed”.

Again, it must be noted that this is not solely the action of one state, namely France. When one looks at the United States, we find that the U.S. government has also been less than fully critical of Ben Ali. For example,

“[w]hen Mr Ben Ali went to Washington in 2004, he was told by George W. Bush, the US president at the time, to improve his human rights record. Two years later, however, Donald Rumsfeld, then US defence secretary, described Tunisia as a “successful country”, citing its ability to create an “environment that is hospitable to investment, enterprise and to opportunity for their people” (Khalaf, Daneshkhu and Thompson, 2011).

In the same report, Khalaf, Daneshkhu, and Thompson (2011) have compiled a number of other quotes by French and US leaders supporting Tunisia under Ben Ali. For example, David Welch, who was the “US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, in 2006” stated that “Tunisia has much to be proud of, and we are honoured to have been a partner with this country for 50 years of achievement and development that is highlighted by the impressive economy and social structure of this nation”. Maurice Hinchey, who was a

member of the US Congress in 2004 stated that “Tunisia plays a critical role in stabilising Middle East politics.”

The West’s (and US) support for Tunisia stems from their help to fight terrorism after the attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2011. Daniel Brumberg, in a CNN report (2011) explains the significance of the US relationship with Tunisia in relation to President George W. Bush’s administration by saying that:

“High-flying rhetoric aside, the fact of the matter is that from 2004, Washington continued to give political and military support to pro-US Arab autocracies. Of the latter, Tunisia was the worst. A police state that tolerated no dissent and boasted a bogus parliament, Tunisian-style autocracy rivaled and in some ways exceeded that of “regional” troublemakers” such as Syria and even Iran. The rationale for US support for Ben Ali was never a mystery. From Washington’s perspective, Tunisia played a key role in the struggle against Islamic extremism. As affiliates of Al-Qaeda reasserted themselves in the early 2000s, Washington viewed Tunisia as an island of stability in a regional sea of potential storms.”

Therefore, while the protests were a successful attempt to oust a clearly authoritarian leader, in the years (and in one case days) prior to his resignation, democratic states from the ‘West’ were touting Tunisia’s ‘achievements,’ despite the numerous rights violations against Tunisians that were committed by the Ben Ali regime during his tenure.

Egypt

Following the protests in Tunisia, citizens in Egypt also took to the streets, as they begin to publically protest against Hosni Mubarak, who was in power since the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981. Mubarak himself has had a history of authoritarian governing, “[i]ndulging in excessive decrees, the extensive use of military courts, and the broad deployment of security forces, Mubarak reversed Egypt’s course and began to “deliberalize”—renewing controls on opposition parties, elections, Islamist activity, civil society organizations, and the press” (Brownlee, 2002: 7). Mubarak’s political regime continued to suppress political opposition, arresting many individuals in the early 1990s (Brownlee, 2002: 7), making it very difficult to form a political party (Brownlee, 2002: 8), as

well as being involved in electoral manipulation (Ibrahim, 1996). However, this authoritative control of the political arena was not limited to the 1990s. In fact, evidence exists to suggest that prior to the 2005, 2008, and 2010 elections, a number of arrests against candidates related to the Muslim Brotherhood—a main political challenge to Mubarak—took place (HRW, 2010).

Yet, despite the history of authoritarianism in Egypt under Mubarak, the United States has continued to support Egypt by providing it with roughly 2 billion dollars of aid annually (Reuters, 2011a). The strong relationship between these two states is not new, but rather has existed arguably since Anwar Sadat and the 1978 Camp David Peace Accords that set the conditions for Egypt to recognize Israel. This came after the tensions between the United States and Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose policy of removing foreign states from the Middle East allowed him to reach high levels of popularity in Egypt and the Middle East, while becoming a political issue for the United States, who were concerned about Soviet influence in the Middle East.

The importance of Mubarak and Egypt as an ally to the United States should not be understood merely within the context of the Cold War. In continuing their financial support, it is evident that Egypt plays a vital role to US interests. Thus the importance of Mubarak to the United States became quite clear during the initial stages of the Egyptian protests. For example, once the recent 2011 protests began and intensified in Cairo and other areas in Egypt, US Vice President Joe Biden, in an interview with Jim Lehrer of PBS, when asked about whether Hosni Mubarak should step down as leader of Egypt, replied by saying:

“No, I think the time has come for President Mubarak to begin to move in the direction that—to be more responsive to some of the needs of the people out there”. He continued to say that he believed “President Mubarak, will—is going to respond to some of the concerns that are being raised.”

Later in the interview, Jim Lehrer asks Biden if he considered Mubarak a dictator, of which Biden responded by saying:

“Look, Mubarak has been an ally of ours in a number of things and he’s been very responsible on, relative to geopolitical interests in the regions: Middle East peace efforts, the actions Egypt has taken relative to normalizing the

relationship with Israel. And I think that it would be—I would not refer to him as a dictator” (PBS, 2011).

A report by the Los Angeles Times emphasized the far from unified position that existed within the Obama administration regarding the US response to the events in Egypt while Mubarak was still in power. The report (Nicholas & Parsons, 2011) stated that a “shifting response” has taken place because of differences within high level members of the US government regarding the situation in Egypt, where, “[a]fter sending mixed signals, the administration has appeared to settle on supporting a measured transition for easing Mubarak out of power. That strategy, which remains the subject of vigorous debate inside the administration, calls for a Mubarak crony, Vice President Omar Suleiman to lead the reform process.” This plan had advocates such as Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, as well as Thomas Donilon, who, according to the report, “worry about regional stability and want to reassure other Middle East governments that the U.S. will not abandon an important and longtime ally” (Nicholas & Parsons, 2011). However, there was said to be some individuals (such as Ben Rhodes, as well as Samantha Power who were highly critical of supporting Suleiman because of his ties to Mubarak (Nicholas & Parsons, 2011). What is important to note is that the administration shifted their position throughout the protests in Egypt, with President “Obama’s own statements hav[ing] evolved as the situation has changed...” (Nicholas & Parsons, 2011). In a February 2nd, 2011 ABC News report by Nick Tapper (2011),

“one official described the administration’s public stance on the issue as having had to change “every twelve hours” as events in Cairo has developed so rapidly. “First it was ‘negotiate with the opposition,’ then events overtook that, the[n] it was ‘orderly transition,’ and events overtook that, then it was ‘You and your son can’t run,’ and events overtook that, and now it’s ‘the process has to begin now,’” the official said. “It’s been crawl-walk-run—we had to increase the pace as events required.””

Some have compared this approach by the Obama administration to that of Jimmy Carter with the Shah before the Iranian Revolution in 1979 (Bird, 2011). In terms of reasons for US support for Mubarak, the report goes on to say that the U.S. administration has a number of concerns about the situation in Egypt such as “...continued Egyptian cooperation on matters

such as counterterrorism, upholding the Camp David accords, [and] access to the Suez Canal...” (Tapper, 2011). However, these are not the only issues of important to the United States, as they are not only concerned about support for Iran, or the allowance of weapons to enter Gaza, but the US leaders have also thought about how these actions in Egypt will affect nearby states that are close to the United States (Tapper, 2011).

Syria

Heading into June, the number of Syrians killed by the regime of Bashar Al-Assad is said to be anywhere from 1,100 (WSJ, 2011) to 1,200 (Hassan, 2011), and over 1,300 as of the sixth of July (Al-Jazeera, 2011a). The government has sent out the military to commit such heinous crimes against innocent civilians who are demanding their rights as individuals. In response to Syria’s actions, the most recent reaction by the international community has included placing sanctions against a number of high-ranking government officials of the Syrian government. But while such responses are indeed encouraging, we have to examine both the history of abuses by the Al-Assad government, as well as the political support received by Western (and non-Western) states.

Bashar Al-Assad came to power in 1999 after the death of his father Hafiz Al-Assad. Since becoming the political leader of Syria, Al-Assad has clamped down on citizen calls for political change. He has increased his power compared to the state institutions, he has quelled challenges to his regime, and corruption has expanded (Perthes, 2006). The 2011 protests in Syria began on March 16th when roughly 150 individuals protested against the Syrian government (through a silent protest) by “[holding] up pictures of imprisoned relatives and friends” (Reuters, 2011b). The government responded with arrests, which were followed by additional protests, and then the deaths of 3 individuals protesting in the city of Deraa (Reuters, 2011b). These acts were just the first in a list of attacks by the Syrian regime on citizen protesters, which included shooting at youth protesters (Reuters, 2011b).

Thus, it is clear that the regime has committed numerous human rights violations that include murder. However, after examining some of the recent statements by U.S. leaders, we find that the leaders not consistent in their speaking out against the abuses of the al-Assad government. For example, at the end of March, when the forces loyal to Al-Assad already were killing protesters (at that point, 61 were killed), John Kerry said about Al-Assad that: “If he responds, if he moves to life the emergency law, to provide a schedule for a precise set of

reforms and precise set of actions...we might begin to question whether something different is happening” (Diehl, 2011). Furthermore, Kerry at this point was not supportive of sanctions against the Syrian government, nor was he in backing the idea of taking the actions of Syria to the United Nations for potential action (Diehl, 2011).

In fact, we find differences in policies when discussing Libya and Syria. With Libya, the United States, with other members of the United Nations (UN) and NATO have intervened in Libya by setting up a no-fly zone and bombing campaign against what is said to be pro-Gaddafi military targets. The United Nations and NATO have said that the reason for these actions are to prevent the loss of innocent life, as pro-Gaddafi forces have killed scores of innocent civilians in Libya. However, one has to wonder why similar actions are not being taken in Syria, where innocent civilians are to this day being attacked and killed by the Syrian military under the leadership of al-Assad. When Secretary of State Clinton was asked on the television broadcast of ‘Face the Nation’ as to whether the United States would—similar to their actions in Libya—become involved in Syria order to prevent innocent lives from being killed, she responded by saying “No[,]” and that the reason for this difference in response is because of the belief by some members of the United States Congress al-Assad is “a reformer” (in Gaouette & Ratnam, 2011). Secretary of State Clinton went on to say that “[w]hat’s been happening there the last few weeks is deeply concerning, but there’s a difference between calling out aircraft and indiscriminately strafing and bombing your own cities...” (in Gaouette & Ratnam, 2011).

As mentioned, Al-Assad’s military has blatantly used violence against protesters throughout Syria. However, even after the international community—led by the United States—has called for sanctions against members of the Syrian government, calls for Al-Assad to resign have been much less clear. For example, President Barack Obama, commenting on the situation in Syria, after recognizing that the Syrian military—under Al-Assad—has committed killings and other gross violations of human rights, seemed to still allow a possibility of Al-Assad remaining in power, when he said:

“President Assad now has a choice: He can lead the transition, or get out of the way. The Syrian government must stop shooting demonstrators and allow peaceful protests; release political prisoners and stop unjust arrests; allow human rights monitors to have access to cities like Daraa; and start a serious

dialogue to advance a democratic transition. Otherwise, President Assad and his regime will continue to be challenged from within and isolated abroad.”

Such language is far from clear in demanding that Al-Assad resign. In fact, the rhetoric seems to indicate a possibility that Al-Assad could still play a role in the political process by showing an interest in democracy and a “democratic transition” through “a serious dialogue”. Thus, not only have we seen members of the United States government reluctant to suggest al-Assad should be removed from office before the mass killings, but even as late as June 3rd, 2011, the emphasis on al-Assad resigning could be seen as ambiguous. Secretary of State Clinton, in comments to journalists said:

“[t]he legitimacy that is necessary for anyone to expect change to occur under this current government is, if not gone, nearly run out.” “If he’s not going to lead the reform, he needs to get out of the way” (WSJ, 2011).

And such lines of comments are not solely from the United States. After recent reports of wide scale government attacks in Hama in July 2011 (Al Jazeera, 2011b), British Foreign Secretary William Hague was quoted as saying that “[t]he UK has made clear that President Assad must reform or step aside. If the regime continues to choose the path of brutal repression, pressure from the international community will only increase” (Al Jazeera, 2011b).

Now of course this is not at all to suggest that Western states are the sole reason for these abuses. The blame should be extended to the government officials responsible for such policies, domestic supporters who are knowingly complacent to such actions, Western and non-Western leaders⁴ in support of the authoritarian leaders, or any inaction by those who have the ability to protect human rights all have different levels of responsibility.⁵ But again, one has to ask what responsibilities outside state leaders of democracies have in continuing to support authoritarian regimes. Again, one must be reminded that al-Assad’s suppression of rights in Syria is not new; his actions have been damaging to the Syrian population for years. However, when one examines the history of comments towards the Syrian government, one cannot help but wonder why it took so long for outside states to speak out against Al-Assad. One has to specifically examine what the US interests are in the region, and the role that Syria plays in their goals. Syria has been an important state in the Middle East for the United States

⁴ In the case of Syria, reports (Hassan, 2011) suggest that non-democratic states such as China and Russia have expressed their resistance against a UN resolution against Syria.

⁵ Gibney (2008) examines the different levels of responsibility in regards to human rights.

because of Syria's relationship with Iran. The United States leadership has attempted to court Syria away from Iran, as well as trying to have Syria and Israel negotiate with the idea of reducing hostilities and agree to peace (Soloman, 2011).

Conclusion

This article has examined ideas of 'Islam and democracy' in the context of the 'Arab Spring.' After reviewing the theoretical support for democracy in Islam, we examined other factors that have played a factor in cases of non-democracy in the Middle East. We have argued that the reason for a lack of democracy in the Middle East has had very little to do with Islam, and much more to do with the history of colonialism, the centralization of power by authoritarian leaders, the use of resources to remain in power, and the support of other authoritarian regimes by 'Western' democracies as well as other states in the international system. In fact, in the discussion about why democratic movements have failed to take hold in the Middle East, Bilgrami (2002) argues that "...at least some of the responsibility for this failing lies with the historical and contemporary influence of Europe and the United States, first by their colonial and then by their corporate presence in these Muslim nations" (66).

Political support for authoritarian leaders at the expense of democracy has been quite evident when examining the 'Arab Spring'. These protests shed light on the relationship (and support) between Western states and authoritarian leaders in the Middle East. Future research will expand this argument to include the language and actions of the United States towards Yemen⁶, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, as well as other European states' actions towards other authoritarian governments (such as Italy's relationship with Gaddafi of Libya).

The hope is that in the states where the citizens successfully removed their leaders from power (or are currently protesting for a similar objective), they will be able to establish a democracy, and elect leaders who would guarantee the human rights of all citizens. However, if this does not happen, we must examine the range of factors as to why it has not happened. For example, is there any substantial evidence to suggest that Islam would be the cause of a

⁶Laura Kasinof and David E. Singer of The New York Times (2011) reported that "[t]he Obama administration had maintained its support of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in private and refrained from directly criticizing him in public, even as his supporters fired on peaceful demonstrators, because he was considered a critical ally in fighting the Yemeni branch of Al Qaeda." They go on to say that "[t]his position has fueled criticism of the United States in some quarters for hypocrisy for rushing to out a repressive autocrat in Libya but not in strategic allies like Yemen and Bahrain." Some in Yemen have been upset that the United States did not openly back the protesters (Kasinof & Singer, 2011). The US has recently called for Saleh to resign (Landay, 2011).

non-democratic system forming? In fact, there seems little support to suggest this. Millions of Muslim citizens in the Middle East and North Africa who have taken part in the protests have called for ideas of human rights, democracy, lack of corruption, and for increase in accountability. Thus, to say that religion, and in this case Islam, is the problem is not an accurate representation of the situation. More plausible explanations include power vacuums and attempts by particular groups to control the political space in these particular cases. For example, one of the major reasons to suggest that democracy may not immediately develop in Egypt—despite calls for such representation by citizens—is the increased role of the military. It is quite understandable to question the intentions of the military in the context of setting up a liberal democracy with freedom of press and speech (for example); the military has arrested journalists who have questioned their actions in the post-Mubarak era of Egypt (Halliday, 2011).

Therefore, we should attempt to understand the events in the Middle East and North Africa with the range of analytical tools that various disciplines have developed. We should examine the role of power within each state, the role of various organizations, civil society, as well as other domestic and international actors who have an interest in the unfolding events in the Middle East and North Africa. But the protests have allowed us to see that Islam did not (and has not) played a key role in the suppression of democracy, but rather, citizens have in some cases, through the lens of Islam, called for the promotion of accountability and rights.

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