

# DEMOCRACY FOR ANOTHER SPRING

*Four years after a wave of protest movements swept across the Middle East in 2011, the revolutionary impulses and calls for democratic regime change have been all but stamped out. The author argues that the region is increasingly divided along sectarian lines, a polarization that impedes stability, and which has produced an egregious humanitarian crisis. According to the author, the consequences of how the relationship between the principles of Islam and democracy are established will be one of the main determinants for what the future holds for the Middle East and its people.*

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TURKISH POLICY  
QUARTERLY

Spring 2015

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**R**ecently, news of Saudi and Turkish cooperation to begin war operations in Syria have been circulating. This is an invasion plan based on sectarianism and designed to bring about the latest catastrophe in a region that has politically collapsed. The warmongering centers of power have ignored the consequences their actions will have on human beings, nature, and history. The Middle East is living through the European Middle Ages while all observers watch without hope, and accept that this picture is the natural image of the region.



Why can't these sinister, conflict-plagued lands get a grip on themselves? Why don't Middle Eastern societies turn around and look at the models of those societies that managed to escape the claws of a belligerent destiny by using rational thinking?

The easiest and most frequent answer we hear to these questions is about the region's oil riches and the unfair sharing of oil profits. This explanation may come easy to those who do not want to analyze the situation or those willing to give the same ready-made answer. The fact is that we are dealing with something far more appealing than oil.

Manipulators employ a variety of cheap tricks, including sectarian cleavages, to rule societies, who live under the illusion of a particular type of culture. External observers looking for change get excited too quickly, saying: "This is it! This time true democracy has arrived!" They are doomed to disappointment when everything quickly regresses. Democracy in the Middle East has failed to flourish due to the relentless resistance of culture. "The Arab Spring" promised too many things for Middle Eastern democracy, but in actuality rolled back even the little political progress that had been made so far.

While the winds of the Arab movements were raging, those watching from abroad heralded the development of democracy in the Arab world. Now, we see that all democracy attempts in the Middle East, with the exception of Turkey, have ended in big fiascos. Turkish democracy is indeed in trouble with the sectarian-oriented greed of its political Islamists, but at least – for better or worse – it still resembles a democracy.

Despite modern democracy's bright promises and the full support of Western optimists, the governments of Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen did not prevail over religious populism. Quite the contrary, the advent of democracy strengthened religion-based violence. The winds carried by social media that blew during the Arab Spring brought on blood and frustration rather than freedom and happiness.

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The words of praise claiming that social media establishes democracy were uttered in haste. The paradigms of dominant culture were not thought through. The realization that social media cannot transform culture was absent. The awaited spring failed to arrive. Too much blood has been spilled, chaos and civil war run rampant, and new trenches of hatred trenches have been dug.

The leaders of sects reminded the crowds, who just silently prostrated in prayer before them, that religion is the boss of the Middle East, and they did this by using gestures alone; no words were necessary. Violence returned as a jihadist cyclone.

In some cases, the democratic rights of the weaker segments of society were protected by the army interfering in politics, which could be constituted as democracy's greatest enemy. This is an irony that the Western world cannot really perceive. Look no further than the example of Egypt!

The West sees no problem in calling majoritarian rulers it does not like dictators, while avoiding the issue with the rulers that it does like. The West is reluctant to understand that in the Middle East democracy finds itself stuck between the Koran and weapons, in a huge state of confusion.

In the Middle East, religious leaders become pharaohs with greater ambition, support, and speed than military leaders. Essentially the great sectarian and ethnic fault-lines utterly destroy the chances of living together around common rules.

The most dramatic changes occurred in the regional military structure. There are now well armed warriors independent of states or governments; those that fight under banners of sectarian groups. The enemy is no longer identified by the state, but by religious leaders. The borders of the Middle Eastern states, set arbitrarily a

hundred years ago, have now become completely uncontrolled and are more like a sieve through which much can easily pass.

In the near future, these borders will exist only symbolically. Various jihadist organizations that sustain their existence with the support of Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, and draw recruits from local societies will further exacerbate this disarray. The multiple, rigid polarizations and factional fighting they generate will last for centuries.

On the other hand, the economic and social issues will continue to surround societies like a cloud beyond the powers of governments and unsolvable by ideology.

In the Middle East, nepotism exists as a given, which makes it very difficult for better educated young people in society to find employment. Those who do manage to find employment do so not because of their knowledge, but due to their privileged proximity to political power.

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The monopoly of commerce benefits the region’s leading families. Production is considered a viable solution neither in collective morality nor among the political ruling structure. The common behavior that overwhelmingly shapes the social fabric has three characteristics: relying on political authority for economic income, appearing more religious and submissive in the hope to benefit more from this form of income, and the important role of this characteristic behavior is deliberately ignored or promoted by intellectuals.

Currently, Middle Eastern politicians do not seem to have any reliable plan to solve this issue. I believe the reason is that any modern approach to resolving current problems would lay the ground for the downfall of these very politicians. Another irony is that despite the cultural, religious, and feudal structure of the Middle East, political fashion dictates that the rule of the country should appear to be inspired by the West rather than the East.

However, with the recent Arab uprisings, Middle Eastern societies have become dominated by more conservative and stricter ideas, characterized by a lack of concern about gender inequality, and covered with vain pride and fake prestige fed

by antagonism towards the West. Digital technology was one of the most efficient means of bringing about this regression.

The inventions of the global communication age were embraced as a revolutionary technique; however, they led not to social change but rather to social closure that feeds on hate.

A widespread view among Western intellectuals is that the winners of the Arab uprisings were the Kurds. However, Kurdish victory is surrounded by sectarian violence that startles even its own perpetrators, which risks fumbling that victory at any moment. Under the reigning chaos, the likelihood of the safe self-improvement of a community seems rather fragile.

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Under these conditions it is very difficult to talk of one true recipe for democracy in the 21st century. While on the subject of failing recipes, besides the fragility of the fault-lines in Middle Eastern societies, I believe we should also look at the influence of Western politics.

Unfortunately, we learn of the support of former US President Ronald Reagan for the mujahedeen in Afghanistan and see pictures of Afghani jihadists skinning and beheading Russian soldiers with machetes only when the brutal machetes become popular again. The US ejected the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, but this also handed ferocious jihadists from all over the world a great victory and gave them self-confidence.

How soon have we forgotten the words of the diplomats of the British Empire, who found the Middle East in their hands only a century ago, proclaiming that the best policy for the region is to have as few people die as possible. Obviously history has not educated us.

The tragedy of refugees facing mass deaths while trying to flee to the West suggests that in nondemocratic countries, the people strive to live in a democracy. The dire need of their citizens to flee also indicates that members of these societies have oriented themselves towards European values, European quality of life, and European freedom. However, when we analyze this orientation, we can also see that there is the desire for more prosperous and egalitarian living conditions rather than democratic

liberal principles. Some of those who have this desire feel no compunction in hiding behind their religious creed and certainly do not shy away from violence.

The impasse confronting global democracy today is the surfacing of this terrifying picture, and not knowing how to deal with it. In the foreseeable future it does not seem likely that a genuine democratic culture, or its institutions, will put down roots.

The collapse of Turkey's respected and solid foreign policy is another tragedy. Turkey's ninety year-long effort to stay out of this chaotic quagmire has been squandered by the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) desire to lead the region. The atrocities to which Turkey has contributed will eventually hit Turkey back mercilessly. Turkey needs to come to its senses as soon as possible. Its foreign policies need to be reevaluated and reformulated in line with the principles of law, secularism, and modernity. Otherwise, it will sink to the levels of Yemen and will never again be able to find the political capacity that has been built meticulously for generations by its internationally esteemed diplomats, whom the current ruling party despises and condescends.

The failure of Turkish democracy will have a devastating effect on the democracies of the Middle East and North Africa, a region that is now perceived as hopeless in terms of having functioning democracies in this century.

The future of democracy in the world is tied to the future of the Middle East and North Africa. Inevitably, "Islam and democracy" is the main axis of this future, both in the region and the world. The fate of the new century will be determined by the consequences of the relationship and interaction between the principles of Islam and democracy. In this future, the fundamental divide in the old East-West dichotomy is not the reconciliation of states but traditional culture and modern politics coming to terms with each other.

Deprived Muslim communities have created gruesome societal structures by listening to the tune of radical violence based organizations like Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, ISIL, and the al-Nusra Front. They need to stop believing in legends that attribute all blame to the devil and confront their own reality. Otherwise, they can never be free.

In a global age, we need solutions for regional problems, otherwise humanity will never feel safe and free in a sovereign liberal order. No matter how much we hear and are attracted to slogans of freedom, equality, and justice in social media, it looks like the future of democracy will keep wrestling with security concerns. I seriously hope I am wrong, and I believe that the only actor that can prove me wrong is Turkey. If Turkey decides to give up being the trigger for and leader of this terrible fragmentation and comes to its senses, I will be proud of having been mistaken.