

THE NEW (DIS)ORDER OF THE MIDDLE EAST

As the Cold War's domination of the geopolitics of the Middle East recedes, a new architecture is emerging, reminiscent of that of Europe in the 19th century. It is an architecture of mid-sized powers engaging in ever shifting alliances and covert and overt struggles to expand and protect their spheres of influence. Like in 19th century Europe, there is a strong connection between countries vying for influence and the cohesiveness of their national, ethnic, sectarian, and religious identities. Even though, in its immediate aftermath, the European "Spring of Nations" was a complete failure, ultimately the ideas that captured the imagination of a rising young population during the brief moment of the "Spring of Nations" triumphed. The ideals represented in the "Arab Spring" could also become a reality following long and painful convulsions of transformation.

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To understand the Middle East today and its future course, Europe of the 19th century provides some intriguing parallels. The shared characteristics of the two places and centuries shed light on the magnitude of transformation that the Arab world is undergoing. Reflecting on these parallels provides cause for both hope and fear.

Europe of the 19th century –or, more precisely, between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the breakout of World War I in 1914– is frequently described as a continent and a century of peace, certainly in comparison to the horrific century that followed. But Europe of the 19th century was also a continent going through convulsions of transformation in fields ranging from technology and government to ideology and geopolitics. Like the mythical characters that change their appearance after having imbibed a magical drink, Europe jerked, agitated, stirred, and shook until it was transformed. No aspect of European life remained untouched by these convulsions. All that became great and all that turned horrific in Europe of the 20th century emerged during that era of transformation.

Europe of the 19th century experienced many rapid changes reminiscent of the Arab world today: technological innovation, and especially a revolution of mass-distributed, fast travelling information was undermining established hierarchies; advances in healthcare and science as well as changes in the economy led to rapid growth of the population; more people were living in cities and more of them were young. This combination of factors meant that information technology became the conduit of radical ideas challenging the established order, and the growing population of young people experiencing this rapid change was prepared to absorb these ideas and convey them further.

The ideas of Liberalism, Socialism, and Nationalism all vied to challenge the conservative order. They challenged the structure of government, the social contract, and the geopolitical structure. More people agitated for greater freedom, greater participation, greater representation, and greater expression of national identities. Driven in part by these ideas, the power architecture of Europe transformed as well. As demands for national expression and greater representation increased, the imperial order, at least on the continent, was challenged. Empires rose and fell, and new countries in the midst of Europe, such as Germany and Italy, coalesced around a national identity. Europe became a continent of several mid-sized powers –France, Britain, Germany, Russia, Italy, and Austria-Hungary– engaged in an ever-shifting web of alliances to protect interests and spheres of influence in the continent and abroad.

When the initial uprisings of peoples against their rulers in the Arab world were named “Arab Spring”, one of the clear historical references was the mold of the 1848 “Spring of Nations” that swept across peoples and nations in Europe and much of the world. The parallel seemed striking as the Arab Spring, much like the European one, was triggered by advances in information technology, by a rising and young population, and by ideas that inspired people to demand governments that were more representative, and societies that were more just. The phrase “Arab Spring” was intended to convey a sense of hope, and indeed for many months, hope was in the air.



However, those looking to relate the “Arab Spring” to the European “Spring of Nations” should have known that the European Spring, in its immediate aftermath, was a complete failure. The ideas of Socialism, Liberalism, and Nationalism represented such a profound challenge to the conservative order in Europe that there was virtually no room for gradual change or moderate accommodation. The only possible response was to quash these ideas –and those agitating for them– altogether.

The battle between the existing order and the emerging one was always going to be bloody, whether in Europe or the Middle East. As in the case of 19th century Europe, writing off the backlash of conservative forces was wrong and dangerous. When reactionary forces mobilized to quash the Arab Spring, many were quick to re-coin it “Arab Winter” and express disappointment at the rapid disappearance of hope for the immediate emergence of a liberal and democratic order. The European “Spring of Nations,” no less than the Arab one however, was also rapidly quashed by a coalition of reactionary forces. Except for minor advances, such as the end of absolute monarchy in Denmark (the European Tunisia?), the conservative and authoritarian backlash was strong and swift, and erased much of the initial achievements of the rebelling peoples. The subsequent backlash was deeply violent with deaths reaching tens of thousands.

The Ottoman Spring of Nations

One of the places that remained noticeably impervious to the broad sweep of the European “Spring of Nations,” which reached as far as Brazil, was the Ottoman Empire. By the time the ideas of the “Spring of Nations” –from Liberalism to Arab nationalism– began to challenge the imperial order, it was late in the life of the Ottoman Empire, and World War I intervened to change its course. The demise of the Ottoman Empire therefore was not homegrown. It did not come about through the rising demands of its subject peoples for greater representation, democracy, and realization of national aspirations for self-determination. Rather it was the British and French empires –still unaware of their own imminent decline– that carved out the vast swathes of the Ottoman Empire in the course of World War I to create artificial states in the European mold. These artificially created states took little or no notice of the wishes of the governed –neither for representation and participation, nor for ethnic national cohesion– and the Ottoman Empire was forced to go through sudden transformation that had nothing to do with the wishes of the people living in its midst.

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The forced transformation of the Ottoman Empire from empire to artificial states shaped by external interests meant that for nearly a century the externally and arbitrarily drawn borders of the new states were held together by sheer force and, when available, legendary sums of oil money. The kings, put in place by the empires, and the authoritarian rulers who deposed them, had to forge new loyalties to King and Country that would erase the competing and powerful loyalties to tribe, religion, ethnic group and nation. Nothing less than sheer brute force would be sufficient to secure the post-World War I order that shaped the modern Middle East.

But the “Spring of Nations” of 1848 ultimately did arrive in the lands previously under Ottoman control. In 2010, after a century and a half of delay, the areas of the Ottoman Empire got their own Spring. But the delayed “Ottoman Spring” meant that by the time the peoples rose, it was no longer against the Ottoman Empire, but against the artificially created states and regimes that were the outcomes of its forced carving. Like in 19th century Europe, the demands for more democratic

government, for political reform, and for greater representation in the course of the Arab Spring were tied with the rise of sectarian sentiments and the demand to find proper political expression for those separate groups.

Once the century-old structures were exposed in their artificiality, the old identities that laid low for nearly a century rose to the surface to claim their due. In Europe, these were called “nations” and “peoples”; in the Middle East they are called “tribes”, “sects”, and “ethnicities” but the principle remains the same. Groups that claim cohesiveness based on history, language, culture, and kinship are rising up, demanding that political structures that do not give expression to these groupings –whether they are multiethnic empires, states artificially created by colonial forces, or small principalities– give way to new structures that better reflect the groups’ demands for more cohesive political expression.

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Just as the empires did not easily give way to the demands of the subject peoples for national expression, and just as Germany and Italy did not emerge from disparate principalities without bloody battles, it would be wrong to expect the post-World War I order in the Middle East to simply fade away in face of the rising ancient identities. The identities created during the century between the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the Arab Spring, despite being relatively new, cannot be written off easily. Current actors in the Middle East have grown up as Syrians, Iraqis, Jordanians, and Saudis, and that has power. These new identities also have the power of interests: powerful economic and military interests are tied to keeping the new identities alive, and they will not give in without a very bloody fight.

A New Power Architecture

Amidst this bloody fight, a new architecture of the Middle East can be glimpsed. As the Cold War’s domination of the geopolitics of the Middle East recedes, a new architecture is emerging, reminiscent of that of Europe in the 19th century. It is an architecture of mid-sized powers engaging in ever shifting alliances and covert and overt struggles to expand and protect their spheres of influence. Like in 19th century Europe, there is a strong connection between countries vying for influence and the cohesiveness of their national, ethnic, sectarian, and religious identities.

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It is no accident that the top mid-sized regional powers which have not had a history of being subject to the Ottoman Empire –Turkey, Iran, and Israel– are those that enjoy the most distinct sense of national identity. Turkey, for obvious reasons, already went through the difficult process of establishing itself as a country with a distinct identity. As the heir to the seat of the Ottoman Empire it is a natural regional power in the areas that were previously under imperial control. While there is still much to be done in terms of greater openness, democratization, and national expression for minorities, Turkey’s regime and coherence are only marginally threatened by the delayed “Ottoman Spring.” Turkey is therefore well placed to play the role of a regional power.

Iran was never part of the Ottoman Empire, and in addition to its distinct Islamic Shiite identity, it has a historical Persian identity that provides it cohesion and coherence. While its regime is highly vulnerable to the ideas of the “Arab Spring”, its national identity is less so (even though there are minorities that might demand greater voice, such as the Azeris or the Kurds). Even if its regime were toppled, its borders and national coherence are likely to remain intact. Coupled with its vast resources and power, Iran is also well placed to play the role of a regional power. It has clear interests in expanding its sphere of influence, particularly when it comes to the Shiites of the Middle East.

Israel is the third non-Arab regional player in the region. Israel has been traditionally viewed as a foreign and colonial insert in the Middle East, an outcome of the colonial carving of the Ottoman Empire even more than countries such as Jordan, Iraq, and Syria. However the historical connection between the Jewish people and their land points to a possible transformation of Israel and the story of Israel in the context of the “Arab Spring.” In this new context, the perception of Israel in the Middle East might change from that of a colonial foreign insert to the national expression of the Jewish people, indigenous to the region. While the Jewish people began their struggle for national expression with the European “Spring of Nations,” which is where they were located in the 19th century, given that their national aspirations were always directed to the Land of Israel, they are more properly thought of as a nation that arose to demand its self-determination in the Ottoman context.

However, given that “Spring of Nations” came to the lands of the Ottoman Empire more than a century and a half later, it is only now that the Jewish people can hope to become accepted as an indigenous people of lands of the Ottoman Empire. Their unique story can now be understood as straddling both the European Spring of Nations and the “Ottoman Spring”. The idea of Jewish self-determination was born in Europe, but it could only be realized in their ancient homeland, an area previously under Ottoman control. The self-determination

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of the Jewish people then finally comes of age and could become accepted and locally integrated with the “Ottoman Spring”.

Israel’s democracy and power mean that it is not domestically vulnerable to the “Arab Spring”, but the acceptance of Israel as a legitimate actor in the Middle East has been the greatest obstacle to its ability to be an integral, and certainly an overt, party to alliances in the region. If this negative perception changes, Israel might find itself openly accepted as a legitimate regional power.

While the top regional powers in the areas previously under Ottoman control are non-Arab, among those in the Arab world, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are the most substantial players. Egypt always enjoyed distinct cohesive character, given its identity as a nation and people that date back to pre-Islamic times. Saudi Arabia, while an outcome of the artificial carving of the Ottoman Empire, always enjoyed heightened status as the historical seat of Arab identity. However, unlike Turkey, Iran, and Israel, the ideas and forces of the “Arab Spring” all present substantial challenges to the regimes of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These regimes therefore need to invest far more of their efforts in preserving domestic stability, while also seeking to play a substantial regional role. Among the Arab countries, one could also consider Qatar, which, due to information technology and massive financial and natural resources, is able to punch above its weight as a regional player.

One more regional power worth mentioning is the new “Czarist” Russia. This is no longer the Soviet Union superpower player of the Cold War era. As the Cold War-era architecture of the Middle East has receded and the Soviet Union disintegrated, Russia has returned to its traditional place as a regional actor in the Middle East.

Russia is now again a mid-sized power protecting its regional interests, and seeking to expand and defend its sphere of influence in the area that is in its immediate vicinity.

All of these regional powers appear to be engaging, to one extent or another, in a web of shifting alliances, overt and covert, to protect their immediate interests and to prevent as much as possible any threats to the stability of their regimes. While these alliances have not yet coalesced into official treaties with memorable names such as “The Triple Alliance” and the “*Entente Cordiale*”, they already seem to be playing traditional sphere-of-influence regional politics that would not shame the Europeans of the 19th century.

Torn between these regional players and within themselves are Syria and Iraq, and Libya, while other countries are in danger of being torn apart as well. The borders of these countries do not match those of the peoples within them and they are still in the throes of bloody battles between the old identities of sect, tribe, religion, ethnicity, as well as the new identities created in the wake of World War I.

The European experience, especially with respect to Germany and Italy, demonstrates that the battles in Syria and Iraq could have a profound impact on reshaping the geopolitical architecture of the region, especially if coupled with extremist ideology. As the Shiite parts of Iraq are becoming part of the Iranian sphere of influence, and Iraqi Kurdistan establishes itself as a separate nation-state, could the Sunni parts of Iraq and Syria join together to truly become the “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Levant?” Should the goal of the Al Qaeda affiliated Islamist jihadists in Syria and Iraq to create an Islamic nation in the lands of Iraq and Syria/Levant be taken seriously? Could the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Levant, if established one day, be the Arab equivalent of Nazi Germany? Could it be the newly formed state in the region’s midst based on a radical and murderous ideology?

The Case for Hope, the Case for Fear

Parallels between different regions and across different centuries, by their very nature, are never precise. They are not predictive and may mean nothing, but as we seek to make sense of events of grand sweep, they inspire us to think of the possible implications of these momentous developments and their future course.

The hopeful message to emerge from the European experience is that ultimately the ideas that captured the imagination during the brief moment of the “Spring of Nations” triumphed. In the long run, the conservative backlash failed to quash the ideas that motivated the “Spring of Nations,” which remained the most powerful

ideas to determine the course of Europe up to the present era. The peoples of Europe ultimately did gain their freedom and establish democratically elected regimes that are representative of their peoples – including even women people. They created economic regimes that included public systems of health, education, welfare, and social security that the socialists of the 19th century would not have even dared imagine, and organized themselves into nations that recognize the aspirations of their distinct people, without giving up on the dream of a unified Europe. This is a triumph of the human spirit and the ability of ideas to shape a continent of freedom, prosperity, and peace.

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There is no reason to accept any claim that the Arab Middle East is somehow impervious to the human desire for freedom and self-expression. The European experience demonstrates that even if reactionary forces have quashed initial revolts in the Middle East, this does not mean that ultimately the peoples of the region will not have their representative governments, or that the women of the Middle East will not one day be free and equal, or that Middle Eastern economies will not one day be open and competitive, or that societies will not be more fair. The peoples of the Middle East want these things no less than those of Europe in the 19th century, and the reactionary backlash does not mean that they want it any less. A future of freedom, prosperity, and peace is still very much a possibility for the future of the Middle East.

The disturbing and almost frightening message to emerge from the European experience is that the path to the realization of the noble ideas of human freedom and justice included two world wars, many regional wars, civil wars, massacres, genocide, Fascism, Nazism, Communism, dictatorships, and tyrannies that all had to be overcome and destroyed for human freedom and democracy to take hold. Many Europeans, enjoying their present state of peace, democracy, and prosperity forget the price that was paid on the path to the present. They expect other countries and regions to somehow smoothly transition from one condition to the next. But the lesson from the European experience is that the transitions from a conservative to a liberal order, from empires to nations, and from tyranny to freedom are never easy. They are bloody. They are vicious and they exact a heavy human toll. The more noble the ideas and the greater the aspirations, the more they challenge the existing order, and thus the greater the backlash they bring about.

Whether one chooses to take the hope or the fear from the European experience, if the path to the final breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of peace, prosperity, and democracy across the areas previously under its control are less bloody than such processes in the European case, it should be considered a miracle and a triumph of human action. As the Jewish people across the world celebrate in Passover their own story of transformation from slaves to free men, from imperial subjects to sovereign people, from individuals to nation, they also remember that this transformation took no less than forty years of misery and wandering in the desert. The Arab world is now wandering in its own desert, undergoing its own misery. If the transformation takes only forty years, we should all –peoples of the Middle East and the world– count ourselves lucky.