DEMOCRACY FATIGUE
AND A RETURN TO THE SECURITY FRAMEWORK
The great hope of the so-called Arab Spring been overtaken by the harsh reality ethnic and religious divides. Egypt is beset by sharp polarization between Islamists and secularists and has opted for strongman rule in the face of ongoing internal security threats. Libya lurches from crisis to crisis and is currently being contested by a medley of militias. Syria is bogged down in a bloody civil war that shows no sign of abating, nor is a winner obvious at this stage, while Iraq is headed toward a break up along sectarian and ethnic lines in the wake of the rapid advance of the terrorist group, the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL), which now occupies most of Iraq’s Sunni heartland and is threatening Baghdad. The only semi-success story is Tunisia, where the Arab Spring started in December 2010, but this is only because its main Islamist party, En-Nahda, agreed to relinquish power in order to avoid what happened to its ideological cousin in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, because of mounting secular opposition to En-Nahda’s rule.

Given the myriad of problems in the Middle East, U.S. efforts at democracy promotion have been put on the backburner, and strategic concerns have come to predominate again. There is little appetite in either Congress or the executive branch for a return to a grand democracy agenda. At most, U.S. policymakers will criticize some egregious actions by new strongmen and old authoritarian regimes, but are unlikely to rock the boat in such states given the ongoing turmoil in neighboring countries.

The Arab Spring was supposed to usher in a new political order in the Middle East based on some type of representative democracy. It has failed for the most part because political parties, with the exception of Islamist ones, have been weak and divided, political institutions lack independent standing, and long-repressed social conflicts (such as the struggle between Islamists and secularists) have come to the fore, not to mention tribal, sectarian and ethnic struggles that have been unleashed with the undoing of authoritarian regimes. Some blame can also be laid at the foot of the United States and the EU for not doing enough financially to aid the transition states. There was no equivalent of a “Marshall Plan” for the Middle East, but perhaps that was unrealistic given the budgetary crises in both the U.S. and the EU.

If the Arab Spring, post-three years, has taught us anything is that democracy cannot blossom until conflicts can be managed by political compromise. For the most part, politics in the region have been a zero-sum game because such struggles have been so intense and the losers of political contests see themselves as the new victims. Hence, the struggles against
authoritarianism have produced factions that have acted in an authoritarian manner against their opponents.

Take the situation in Iraq. The U.S.-led invasion not only overthrew the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein but turned the social power structure upside down. The long repressed Arab Shia of Iraq became the new rulers and they were determined not to play second fiddle to the previously dominant Arab Sunnis, while the Kurds consolidated their autonomous mini-state in northern Iraq. The recent and rapid advance of the terrorist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the Sunni areas of Iraq could not have been achieved without at least the tacit support of the Sunni tribal leaders who resented the rule of Prime Minister Maliki and his Shia-dominated government. The dismal showing of the new, multi-sectarian Iraqi army, particularly in the city of Mosul where officers and soldiers fled by the thousands against a numerically inferior ISIL force, has now compelled the Maliki government to rely on Shia militias and units of the Iraqi army that are exclusively Shia to protect Baghdad and Shia-populated southern Iraq.

The United States, because it fears the ramifications of a victory for ISIL, which already controls a large swath of territory in eastern Syria and western and central Iraq, has now sent about 300 military advisers to Iraq and has left open the possibility of air strikes against ISIL forces. In the process, it is trying to compel Maliki to engage in “political inclusivity” – that is, bringing more Sunnis into the government—but this emphasis on inclusivity has been tried many times before, with no success. Maliki, despite refashioning himself as an Iraqi nationalist, is the same person who worked for the secretive Shia Dawa party for most of his career (much of it in exile in Syria and Iran before returning to Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003). He may continue to give lip service to inclusivity but will not be any more serious this time around. Meanwhile, the Kurds used the recent chaos to take control of the Kirkuk, sometimes called the Kurds’ Jerusalem, a city of mixed Kurdish-Arab population whose future was supposed to have been settled by referendum in 2007 but was put off many times. In one fell swoop, the Kurds have now incorporated Kirkuk into their mini-state. Having oil resources, a strong security force (the capable pesh merga), and now their territorial demands met, the Kurds have no real desire to re-enter Iraqi politics in a meaningful way and want no part of the internecine struggle between Arab Sunnis and Arab Shia.
U.S. policymakers are trying to put Iraq back together again—Secretary Kerry implored the various factions to work toward Iraqi unity—but that ship has already sailed. At most, the U.S. can help prevent ISIL from taking Baghdad and the Shia south, but ejecting ISIL from the Sunni heartland is a much more difficult task, and getting the Kurds to buy into a new Iraqi government will be equally problematic. Ironically, the United States finds itself in common cause with Iran at this stage because the Iranians see ISIL, because of its anti-Shia agenda, as a threat as well.

On Egypt, Kerry’s June 2014 trip to Cairo, where he announced that held-up U.S. assistance would soon be released, underscored the predominance of security issues in the bilateral relationship. Although Kerry pressed Egyptian authorities to uphold “freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association,” and signaled that the United States would continue to speak out against human rights’ violations, the emphasis of the meetings seemed to suggest that the United States was no longer going to pursue punitive measures (such as suspending aid) on Egypt because Egypt was too important strategically to upset.

With much of the Middle East in turmoil and with a realization that the road to democracy is fraught with potholes and zero-sum politics, Washington has returned to a strategic-focused policy toward the region. The euphoria of 2011, when democracy seemed on the march against authoritarianism, has faded considerably. Washington will continue to press various regimes on political freedoms and inclusivity, but these issues will only be of secondary importance as security issues overwhelm all other concerns.

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