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HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST BEFORE THE “ARAB SPRING” – AND AFTER

By Adam Garfinkle



Adam Garfinkle is the founding Editor of The American Interest magazine and a member of FPRI's Board of Advisors. He was a speechwriter for Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice. His FPRI essays can be found here:

<http://www.fpri.org/contributors/adam-garfinkle>

He also writes a blog for The American Interest magazine on “The Middle East and Beyond,” which can be accessed here:

<http://blogs.the-american-interest.com/garfinkle/>

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Beginning about three years ago in Tunisia, and spreading to a number of other Arab countries thereafter, what has become known (unfortunately¹) as the “Arab Spring” took experts, locals and media observers of all stripes by surprise. The reason is that the Arab world in the modern, post-independence era, had heretofore been generally quiescent politically in the face of authoritarian regimes. Changes of government, of which there were many since the mid-1940s, all took place among contending elites—often at the hands of military men. Swollen crowds of mobilized, irate civilians, on the street demanding change were few and far between.

So the welling up of public anger in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and elsewhere opened a new era in the political sociology of the Arab countries. Naturally enough, we should want to know in more detail what happened, and why. It seems clear enough that, on the one hand, a demonstration effect helped spread the protests from Tunisia to Egypt and from those two states elsewhere. But on the other hand, no two cases have been alike, and the outcomes have been as diverse as the countries in question are distinct from each other. It is also clear, though rarely stated, that some Arab countries were virtually unaffected by the tide of protest. There has been but relatively mild agitation, so far, in Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Sudan and Algeria. Even Lebanon has experienced only mild perturbations given the parlous Levantine zone in which it sits.

Moreover, it is obvious that mass-participation political protest is hardly unique to the Arab countries or to the

¹ See Asher Susser, “The ‘Arab Spring’: The Origins of a Misnomer,” *FPRI E-Note* (April 2012).

contemporary scene. Such episodes are as old as polities themselves and speckle the histories of every populated continent. In the Middle East alone in recent years the abortive 2009 Green Revolution in Iran predated the uprising in Tunisia, and that has been followed by demonstrations against democratically elected governments in Israel and Turkey—peaceful in the former case, not quite so pacific in the latter.

We are thus confronted with a classic challenge: separating what is universal in socio-political behavior from what is particularist to specific regions and countries. Hence the usual good sense of the hoary and fearsome beginning to many a social science and history exam question: “Compare and contrast.....” The challenge requires us to call upon our reservoir of epistemological savvy, accumulated over generations of intellectual toil, and then to distill what we have learned into actionable methodologies. This is a challenge that, at one level, confronts the highest domains of scholarship and policy science, but any teacher at any level depends for success at not only knowing *what* to teach, but also *how* to teach it.

TWO APPROACHES TO EXPLAINING THE MIDDLE EAST

Obviously, too, understanding the diverse paths of the “Arab Spring” can be approached from a host of social science disciplinary perspectives—political science (especially its subfield of comparative politics), sociology, anthropology, economics, social psychology and demography at a minimum, supplemented certainly by history, and perhaps, depending on the case, also by international relations theory, religious studies, urban and human geography, comparative linguistics and environmental studies. (My mention of environmental studies, by the way, is not just decorative: Rising food prices played a role in touching off the protests of the “Arab Spring”, and part of the reason was prolonged drought in some parts of the region, including Syria. American bankers speculating in commodities certainly haven’t helped, either.)

The task may also be, and rather too often is, approached from rigid ideological starting points, whether that ideology is explicitly acknowledged or not: Marxism, libertarianism, Enlightenment Whiggery, anti-“Orientalism,” postmodern anti-foundationalism, and a host of others old and new. But, at least to some extent, ideology is an inevitable factor because our motives for knowing anything about the world cannot be entirely separated from how we go about investigating it.

So knowing where to start getting a firm grip on a topic like “The Middle East Before the Arab Spring” requires a great deal more sophisticated intellectual foreplay, so to speak, than might at first be evident. Indeed, it begs an increasingly rare panoptical familiarity with the social sciences and humanities as a whole. The reason is that to properly encompass a phenomenon as capacious as the “Arab Spring,” *all* of the approaches noted above probably are useful angles of observation and analysis.

Our humility thus established, still others choices intrude, too, as we make our way from epistemology to method. We could include all the countries of the region in a comparative study, or just a core few. We could contrast those societies wracked by upheaval with those that have remained relatively unperturbed. We could stick to just the Arab countries or add to them the non-Arab states universally considered to be part of the region (Iran, Turkey and Israel), and/or the non-Arab majority-Muslim countries on the region’s periphery (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Mali, and others). And we could define the starting base of the “Arab Spring” either as a snapshot—a static description of what the region, in each of its countries, looked like on the eve of Mohammad Bouazizi’s flaming protest suicide in Tunis on December 17, 2010 -- or as a video.

Were we to choose the snapshot approach for whatever grouping of countries we have selected, we could start by consulting the *CIA World Factbook* and other reference sources for 2010 for population/demographic/ethnography data; GNP, per capital GNP, labor profile and trade statistics; K-12 education levels, higher education data, books published, patents and other economic data; statistics about the environment, the media, the legal system and more besides. If we chose the video approach, we could run the cinema of time backwards from December 17, 2010 to identify trends in the making in these and other, less easily quantifiable, domains. Or we could start at some predetermined date in the past—perhaps back to the cusp of the independence period at the end of World War II, perhaps back to the founding of the modern Middle Eastern state system after World War I, perhaps back to the epochal Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1799, perhaps back to the beginning of Ottoman imperial domination in 1517, perhaps back to the birth of Mohammed in the 7th century, perhaps back to that misty, gloomy morning after the expulsion from the Garden of Eden that some date to about 5,774 years ago....you see an additional problem

here, right?—and run the video forward. By all rights, were we determined upon a comprehensive study, we would do see the snapshot approach as a necessary but insufficient condition to achieve explanatory success as we drive our snapshot either forward or backward into social motion.

THE ATTRIBUTES OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

In a presentation of such modest length as this, we obviously cannot do very much of substance. But we can do a good deal more than nothing. Limiting the scope to the Arab countries helps bring some coherence to a necessarily truncated project, again, notwithstanding the fact that in recent years extra-parliamentary protests of varying sorts have featured in the politics of Iran, Turkey and Israel as well. We will also presuppose the snapshot foundation of any study, and adopt a somewhat unorthodox “video” approach to describing the pre-December 17, 2010 baseline: We will start with a taxonomical unpacking of where many, if not most, non-expert American observers mistakenly thought the “Arab Spring” was heading: namely, toward a convergence with current international governance “best practice” in a liberal democratic regional state system. (I will justify this choice in the third and final section of this essay, just below.)

Happily, we have at hand a powerful and lucid way to describe liberal democratic best practice.² Unhappily, perhaps, we must leave the Arabs and the Middle East to their own devices for a moment while we lay out the necessary framework.

A functional “best practice” liberal democracy consists of three fundamental institutions in balance. The first of these is a post-patrimonial Weberian state, in other words, a state whose executive function is characterized by impersonal, formal authority. In a modern state, administrative processes are based on meritocracy and established procedures impervious to penetration by personalistic or familial interests. This contrasts markedly with premodern arrangements in which the state was in effect the personal domain of ruling dynasties, whose leaders typically depended on kinship ties and personal ties of reciprocal altruism to staff bureaucratic apparatus. Loyalty was thus based on concrete relationships, not abstract ones associated with law-based orders. Patrimonial political orders often depended not only on the dynastic principle but also on the imperial one, for such orders can encompass and manage heterogeneous populations through a mix of co-optation, repression, and the inertia of subsequent habit, not through the equalizing formula of ethnicity- and sectarian-blind citizenship. The transition from patrimonial to Weberian authority aligns fairly closely with the transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, as famously and brilliantly outlined by Ferdinand Tönnies some 125 years ago, and also with the passing of imperial to nationalist formulas for political legitimacy.

The second of these institutions is rule of law, the apex of which is constitutional law. The rule of law lends order and predictability to political arrangements, not least because rulers are bound by the same general constraints as everyone else in society. In other words, in a modern liberal democracy, law trumps persons. Put another way, the judicial function in the society of a liberal democracy is at least nearly coequal to the executive function. It is usually through the rule-of-law function in a liberal democracy that the “liberal” part of the phrase is sited, in the shape of formal protection for minority rights, rights of free speech, assembly, and so on.

It helps, too, when social attitudes incline toward some degree of philosophical egalitarianism, even if social reality is to a considerable degree hierarchical. Equality under the law fits much better with the accountability aspect of liberal democracy than a law formally or informally based on stark class (and gender) distinctions. Since contemporary law in democratic politics derives ultimately from religious law, it ends up mattering how various religious traditions went about reconciling principles of equality and hierarchy.

It also helps when rule of law is based on the premise or assumption that authority is intrinsic to society and can be changed by society as necessary—“of the people, by the people, and for the people,” in Lincoln’s words—rather than extrinsic to it in the form of divine revelation. That premise sires genuine tolerance as against mere forbearance, and inculcates a critical habit of the heart that sees open debate as a healthy tension that gives the concept “loyal opposition” its meaning.

² See Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011), and the sequel, volume 2, forthcoming September 2014.

The third of these institutions is accountability—some means by which political leaders' decisions and general behavior can be aligned over time with the desiderata of the majority of citizens. Accountability can be procedural or substantive. Procedural accountability looks like the majority-rule electoral processes with which we are familiar in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and today nearly all of Europe and South America and much of East Asia beyond.

Substantive accountability abides in the proclivity of leaderships to know and be sensitive to the wishes of their populations even in the absence of formal or explicit obligations to do so, a quality that has varied from political culture to political culture over time. Procedural accountability may or may not depend on a preexistent reservoir of substantive accountability. Certainly that is the case in the United States: the Founders and their tutors, Locke, Montesquieu and even Rousseau in his more lucid moments, never believed that virtue in governance depends on the adoption of a particular form of government; rather, they knew that a particular form of government is the *consequence* of a people's long and refined moral and social experience. The Founders understood, thus, that Americans had suffrage because American society was democratically minded, not the other way around.

It is important to note that the character of the state, rule of law and accountability are not just aspects of an integrated historical development, and they do not always converge. Each has its own logic, its own dynamic and its own history in specific circumstances. China had a Weberian state as long ago as 1800 BCE, and it retains a very strong state today; but it lacks real rule of law and procedural accountability. In the German-speaking principalities there existed what is sometimes called a *Rechtsstaat*—a law-state—which derived from both Roman law and canon law from the Catholic Church. After 1870-71 Germany also developed a strong state, but it never developed accountable institutions before World War II. The United States inherited strong rule-of-law institutions from its Anglo-“common law” origins, and it established institutions of procedural accountability early on; but relative to Britain, France, Spain, Holland and Germany after 1870, it possessed a small and a weak state, certainly at the national level in a federal system, but even at the state level. As a result, Samuel Huntington aptly described the American republic as aligned with its origins as a “Tudor state” of “courts and parties”, where administrative power usually entrusted to executive bureaucracies in modern European states instead fell to the judicial branch and to massive clientalism lorded over by the main political parties in the legislative branch. The United States did not even begin the construction of a professional civil service until the passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883 (and when it did so, it did so for motives far removed from a benign desire for a more competent, efficient federal government). Even today the American federal executive, though vast in scope, is weak in performance and quality not least because it is still encumbered by mountainous heaps of coherence-depleting litigation and by several varieties of clientalism that increasingly enable powerful rentier elites to distort democratic processes.

Not only can the three institutional components of a modern liberal democracy exist apart from one another, but the historical sequence of development of the three can be used to define regime types in accordance with the principle of “path dependency.” In an ideal modern liberal democracy, all three exist and have come to some sort of balance or equipoise. Short of this ideal circumstance, politics can still be liberal democracies, albeit imperfect ones when the balance is off. When one or two or all three of the basic component parts of a modern liberal democracy are missing, we have regimes defined by adjectival terms such as anarchic, oligarchical, authoritarian, despotic, tyrannous or dictatorial.

THE ARAB COUNTRIES ON THE EVE OF THE “ARAB SPRING”

Having set out in brief this parsimonious, user-friendly typology, what can we say about the political sociology of the Arab countries on the eve of the “Arab Spring”? Of course we must be careful, because there are nearly two dozen Arab states and no two of them are alike. But space constraints mandate some generalizing.

On the matter of a post-patrimonial Weberian state, the verdict is a fairly flat “no.” On the contrary, to one degree or another all the Arab countries are ruled by states that are patrimonial in nature. To one degree or another, all these states are defined by tribally based affinity networks, a relationship known in (transliterated) Arabic as *assabiyeh*. In the more heterogeneous Arab states, whether that heterogeneity is ethno-linguistic or sectarian in nature, this means that in-groups and out-groups often have problematic relations. In such states, and often in the more homogeneous ones as well, the absence of a competent post-patrimonial state often impels regimes to resort to active intimidation and repression by means of the *mukhabarat* (secret police) state, invariably led by elite members of the in-group.

Over time in Egypt, Tunisia and a few other relatively homogeneous states, affinity networks have transcended or overlaid tribal and kinship ties to some extent to coalesce in new “professional” affinity formations, particularly in military and police organizations. It is thus interesting but not entirely surprising that the upheavals of the “Arab Spring” began in two such military-bureaucratic states—Tunisia and Egypt. As the upheavals proceeded to roil other Arab states, the social basis of conflict took on very different characteristics. They did so in Libya, where tribal/regional divisions are acute; in Syria, which is heterogeneous along sectarian and to some extent ethno-linguistic lines; in Iraq, which is similarly heterogeneous but which also suffered a highly disorienting external convulsion in advance of the “Arab Spring”; in Bahrain, whose heterogeneity is starkly sectarian and only very modestly ethno-linguistic; and in Yemen, whose social complications simply defy brief summary.

Whatever the distinctions, however, the fact is that to one degree or another all the Arab countries (as well as countries such as Afghanistan and Somalia) are tribal- and/or clan-based in terms of the distribution of social authority. To one degree or another, all practice endogamous marriage—and the Arabs, uniquely among ethno-linguistic agglomerations, prefer male-line/male-line first-cousin marriage. This practice does not come from nowhere. Tribal organization, whatever else it is, is a means to create defense networks in the absence of strong central authority. Cousin marriages, invariably arranged marriages in traditional societies, are a means to amalgamate land and livestock holdings, which conduce to economic and social power. As a rule, such strong-society traditions militate against strong-state formations, particularly so to the extent the wider society within today’s recent-origin political boundaries are heterogeneous.

In tribal societies that characterize the Arab world to one degree or another (very strong in places like Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, Jordan, Iraq, Syria and somewhat weaker these days in places like Tunisia and Egypt), identification with the territorial state is weak compared to that of tribe, clan and sect. Except for very old polities such as Egypt and Iraq (Mesopotamia), most Arab polities are of recent origin and their peoples cannot so confidently be described as nations in the strict meaning of the word—again, especially so in the more heterogeneous societies. Plainly, one cannot have a liberal democratic state if there is no coherent state to speak of in the first place.

What about rule of law? This is complicated, alas. The legal regime in the Arab countries varies from place to place. In the more traditional societies, and all of the monarchies, Islamic law (*shariah*) holds a privileged place in all aspects of domestic family law, pertaining to marriage and divorce, inheritance and so forth. Overlaid on top of Islamic law is Ottoman law in most, but not all countries, often pertaining to land-title and other forms of commercial and contract law. European law, both common law and continental, plays a contemporary role in many countries as well. But in no Arab country has there ever been a form of genuine constitutional law that sets rulers within some bounds of legal restraint. Nor has there ever been a true rooting of philosophical pluralism and the establishment of concepts such as “loyal opposition.”

Of course there have been constitutions aplenty in the post-World War I period, and there have been hundreds of political parties as well. But none of the constitutions has ever really constrained willful leaders, whether monarchs or military rulers, and very few of the parties have been legitimate bottom-up expressions of civil society. Rather, they have typically been top-down creations of leadership cadres created for purposes of projecting “modern” appearances, patronage distribution and mostly harmless political venting.

The hierarchical, personalistic and law-“lite” nature of political life in the Arab world has also given rise nearly everywhere to a rentier economic class that is adjunct to and usually only slightly below the status of the political elite. In most Arab countries, starting a legal business outside of tribal/clan connections is very difficult. Barriers to entry into whatever actual markets there may be are usually very high, and the markets themselves are grossly distorted by pervasive rentier behaviors.³ One of the reasons for the poor economic performance of Arab countries, even including the ones endowed with natural resources (riches and wealth are not synonyms), is that the economies of these countries, and the associated banking/financial institutions, are highly constrained by patronage-minded gatekeepers. Access to genuine and effective higher education is similarly constrained in many countries, which has the effect over time of depressing the growth of human capital, severely so compared to that of other regions, like East Asia, whose economic development rested on a par with that of the Arab countries as recently as half a century ago.

³ See Hernando de Soto, “The Arab World Still Finds Itself Locked Out of Prosperity,” *The Daily Star* (Beirut), October 23, 2013.

And what of accountability? Despite an abundance of Potemkin Village, marquee elections over the years, no Arab country has a record of holding genuinely free and fair elections. Even the June 2012 election of Mohammed Morsi, widely described as free and fair, was deeply marred by the barring of several credible candidates by the Egyptian SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces). Procedural accountability is thus very weak.

On the other hand, substantive accountability can be and often has been strong within kinship-based affinity groups. Tribes, clans, and other family networks are good at developing and nurturing social trust within their ranks, and they have traditionally done this through informal consensus-building methods that allow all factions and opinions access to decision-making. This method, however, runs sharply against the grain of winner-take-all majoritarian voting methods, which make little sense in the traditional scheme of things. Against the patrimonial and weak rule-of-law bases of Arab circumstances, one can readily appreciate William Brown's characterization of Arab elections as he expressed it in his 1980 book *The Last Crusade*:

According to the liberal democratic norms of the West, political institutions are dedicated to enacting the wishes of a tolerant majority. In the Middle East the purpose of political institutions is to facilitate the constant unfolding or revelation of a popular consensus. . . . The Arab perceives a single community of faith and language that contrasts sharply with our emphasis on competing but mutually adjusting political factions. In the West, politics has a flavor of controlled conflict that the Arab regards as destructive to community.

The more traditionally organized Arab polities tend to have much deeper reservoirs of substantive accountability than the "progressive," avowedly secular military regimes of the region. Heterogeneous Arab societies, whether in traditional or "progressive" polities, are thus usually characterized by very deep but very narrow wells of social trust, or social capital. In Robert Putnam's terms, these societies are long on "bonding capital" but very short on "bridging capital."⁴

THE "ARAB SPRING" AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Since the onset of the "Arab Spring" three years ago, none of the countries convulsed by upheaval has acquired a stable liberal democracy, and only one has achieved any semblance of democracy at all. Tunisia has achieved a thin electoral democracy, not a thick liberal democracy by any means, and its future remains cloudy. Despite widespread illusions, Egypt never achieved democracy, nor did the Morsi election suggest it would given the actual proclivities of the Muslim Brotherhood. In none of the other countries that have been convulsed by protest are those societies on the verge of pluralist, let alone democratic, government.

In light of the absence of most or, in many cases, all three of the foundational elements of a liberal democracy, this ought to come as no surprise. And indeed, many regional experts, this writer included, went on record early in the process to predict that few or even no democracies would ultimately emerge from the tumult. How to explain, then, the overwhelming tendency of (non-expert) American (and some other) observers to believe that liberal democracies were about to break out all over the Arab world? Why did so many Americans think that the fall of Hosni Mubarak represented "regime change" toward a democratic outcome when it amounted merely to the circumvention of a dynastic succession? Why did so many think that the masses out on the streets in various Arab countries represented a Philippines-like "people power" democracy movement, when in the main it instead expressed well-earned rage at the arrogance, the incompetence, the greed and the assault on basic human dignity launched by the governing rentier and *mukhabarat*-dependent elites?

While there are far more genuine democrats in the Arab world today than was the case a generation or two ago, and while real social changes are afoot in nearly all the Arab countries that point toward greater pluralism, the protestors of the "Arab Spring" knew only what they were against, not what they were for. To take the seminal case in point, Mohammed Bouazizi was not an ideologue. He was not a philosopher. He was not a human rights activist. He was an overeducated, connection-less fruit-stand vendor who went berserk when the cops destroyed his "illegal" business. He cared not a fig about democracy as Westerners understand it, and neither did the vast majority who took to the streets in Tunisia and then elsewhere after his stunningly powerful symbolic act of defiance.

I have adopted the backwards-video method presented here because my purpose, mentioned above but kept

⁴ The reference is to Putnam's justly famous 2001 book *Bowling Alone*.

shrouded in mystery until now, is ultimately to help *American* readers to understand the “Arab Spring”—and especially to help those brave, dauntless heroes who would teach this perilous material to their students. Most Americans profoundly misunderstood what was going on the Arab world starting about three years ago because we, like most people, tend to project our unself-aware frames of reference onto others. We incline to see similarities when differences prevail. We do this beyond the natural limits of transcultural awareness in relatively insular cultures like ours, especially one in which creedal foundations more than tribal bloodlines define our nationhood, because of the particular American inheritance of Enlightenment universalism.

For most Americans the three institutional sources of liberal democracy, all mashed together along with apple pie and the Fourth of July, just fell from the sky onto New England and Virginia one day back near the end of the 18th century. This describes belief in a form of secular revelation, the oracle of which tells us that liberal democracy, along with market economics, compose the socio-political default drive of all humanity. It follows that if other societies don’t operate as we do, some artificial and removable obstacle is preventing it. If we help remove these obstacles, democracy and market economics will easily and quickly spring forth because they align with human nature. It happened in East/Central Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, so why not in the Middle East, or in Afghanistan? We are believers in the idea of progress, and in a political age that translates in foreign policy terms into democracy promotion by dint of what we wrongly call “nation-building” (we actually mean “state-building” most of the time).⁵

The truth is that America earned its political virtues the hard way, which is also the only way, which is to say through the travails and trial-and-error experiences of history—ours and those of America’s European, mainly British, forbears. Nothing fell from the sky. Others, with different historical experiences, will logically and dependably develop different habits of the heart when it comes to social and political life. There is no universal default drive for political best practice. So not only do we project our frames of reference onto others, our frames are not especially well constructed to begin with.

Moreover, what we Americans are sure is purely “secular”—democracy, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and all the rest—just isn’t. Most of what we cherish about our political life, at its best, is a deep inheritance of Anglo-Protestantism that has long since been shrouded in the secular language of modernity, but that retains most of its distinctive logical syntax as a form of religious thought. Nothing is ever lost, merely covered over in one way or another; we have not entirely escaped the “political theology” paradigm, only masked and remolded it.⁶

Consequently, our attitude toward political life in general, and toward the world outside our borders in particular, is reminiscent of a passion play in which there are two and only two sides, one good and one evil. When our leaders encounter a foreign policy dilemma with more than two sides, and where none of the sides looks particularly “good” by our definition, they simply don’t know what to do—and neither do most of the rest of us, which puts a real crimp on our capacity for patience. The Middle East is uncannily adept at coughing up such multiple-actor, no-good-guy circumstances. Try as we may to drive every scintilla of Middle Eastern complexity back into our Manichean strongbox, we succeed in so doing only at the cost of confounding our perceptions and policies toward the region. We did precisely that with the Bush Administration’s “forward strategy for freedom” and we did it as a society when, led by our clueless mass media, we beheld the first green shoots of the “Arab Spring.”

WHERE WILL THE “ARAB SPRING” LEAD?

Finally, where will the “Arab Spring,” in all of its diverse manifestations in more than twenty countries, actually lead? It may lead to pluralism in some places and, in tandem with other social and technological developments, ultimately to democracy in a few. There is no reason to think that the Arab future must slavishly imitate the Arab past anymore than is the case in other cultures. There is nothing morally or cognitively “wrong” with Arabs, and it is nonsensical to think that Islam, unlike other religious systems, is utterly resistant to change when its own history demonstrably shows otherwise. Nor are Arabs particularly poor traders or businessmen; if the chokehold of avaricious rentier elites on Arab economies can be broken, there is every reason to expect burgeoning prosperity. On balance, it’s easier to stand up a vibrant market economy from a distorted one than it is to raise up liberal democracy more or less from scratch, but even the latter is ultimately doable. People change, and whole cultures

⁵ I elaborate the point in my “Missionary Creep in Egypt,” *The American Interest* (Sept.-Oct. 2013).

⁶ See Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion and Politics in the Modern World* (Vintage, 2007).

change with them, because we have real choices that vindicate our nature as moral beings.

So far the “Arab Spring” has led to greater turmoil and violence than it has to prosperity, social peace or pluralism, and may yet do so in more countries as time passes. Most important, perhaps, the “Arab Spring” may well lead to the destruction not only of the state system that came into being after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, but also to the destruction of several Arab states themselves. Syria is one already far along, Iraq is another right behind, and Libya may turn out to be a third.

Most likely, the Westphalian territorial state-based façade layered on the region by the great powers in the early years of the 20th century may be disintegrating. In the absence of an imperial consolidator able to play the role of Ottoman Turkey (or other empires before it), the prospect, at least for some parts of the region, is a mediaevalsque leveling of social authority, the likes of which the Levant has not seen since the period between the rescission of the Mongols in the mid-13th century until the coming of the Turks in the early 16th. This a pretty picture does not make, and it portends a degree of radical insecurity that is not conducive to the birth and maturation of democratic attitudes and institutions. Some “Spring.”

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 255, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org.