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Democracy, Autocracy, and US Policy in the Arab World: The Return of Realism?

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Overview: It's Not About Obama

Whether measured in terms of high diplomacy or official funding levels, it is clear that US support for promoting democratic change in the Arab world has fallen on hard times.¹ Indeed, the struggle against “violent extremism” and the enduring threat posed by *Daesh* (ISIL) and its regional affiliates is now the central concern of US highest foreign policy makers from the president on down. I doubt that this focus on security will change regardless of who occupies the Oval Office starting in late January 2017. In reaching this judgment, I do not subscribe to the thesis that the current and recent US Middle East policies can be traced to Barack Obama’s supposed ideological proclivities, world-view or family history. The thesis is surely seductive, particularly given Obama’s clear resolve to tightly control that policy. But long blog pieces such as Jeffrey Goldberg’s “The Obama Doctrine” *do not prove* the existence of such a doctrine much less its influence.² A fascinating example of *reportage* that draws on—but does not include transcripts of—the one-on-one discussions the author had with the president, Goldberg’s article conflates his voice with that of Obama. This conflation in turn helps the author avoid considering other possible explanations of this “doctrine” and its purported influence on the President’s foreign policy making-decision process. In fact, the record strongly suggests that this process grew out of an improvised, crisis-driven approach sparked by the 2011 Arab political revolts. Sitting on the proverbial couch after eight years of struggling with the region, Obama’s efforts to explain, justify and rationalize these decisions *post facto* is unsurprising. However, rationalization and doctrine are related but different things. The rationalization of decisions pivots around an evolving response to emerging and often unexpected challenges—even as it draws from political instincts and ideological preferences, both of which were relevant but not determinative of Obama’s actions and non-actions. The latter were driven by cost-benefit analyses born from a set of interlocking constraints rooted on the fused or “pillared” nature of state power and identity politics in the Arab world—and in the troubling, if often unintended, consequences that came with wrestling with this complex legacy. This paper summarizes three related versions of these constraints, highlights their impact on the Obama’s approach to political change in the Arab world, and concludes with some thoughts as to how the next president and their administration will contend with the enduring challenges of political change.

Constraint Number 1: *Shamshun* and the Pillared State

Drawing in part on the work of Arend Lijphart, the first of these constraints might be called the “pillared state.”³ The term connotes the way in which the key strands of state power were fused into one great self-supporting pillar, thus making it likely—*especially from the vantage point of those elites who wield power*—that any effort to unwind one more or these strands would rapidly untie all the others. This kind of great unraveling invites the one threat that no ruling elite tolerates: state collapse. In the Arab world—as in Iran—the very survival of ruling elites has long depended, to one extent or the other, on owning or controlling the economic, political and security levers or strands of state power.

One reason that such assurances were difficult to come by, and equally difficult to imagine, was the very tight fit between ruling elites, security sectors, and state institutions. This *ménage à trois* made it very hard for rulers to imagine surviving any divorce. But it was precisely this kind of divorce that was required if any measure of serious political change of a democratizing nature was to take place. As any student of democratization knows, ruling leaders and those groups who they protect—or purport to protect—will not countenance change unless they have some reasonable or “credible” assurances that the pillar of state rule can be partly unwound *without* collapsing on top of them.⁴ In this sense, the memory of the legend of Samson (*Shamshun* in Arabic) endures: Business elites need to know or believe that abandoning political power will not bring bankruptcy on their heads. Security elites must believe that if they forfeit the role of regime protector and become a professional security apparatus they will continue to enjoy the economic and corporate benefits that had been previously guaranteed by their fusion with the state. And all leaders must know or believe that they will *physically survive* if and when the great unwinding begins. The irony, of course, is that the longer the pillared state endured, the more difficult it became to imagine any alternative to it.

MES Notes

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Constraint Number 2: Pillared Identities and the Protection Racket System

Drawing on Lijphart once again while also invoking themes from the *God Father* trilogy and the work of the late Charles Tilly, the second related constraint on democratic change in the Arab World—and far beyond—is rooted in the “protection racket” role that states, political systems, and ruling elites play in defending specific identity groups, which maybe based on religion, sect, ethnicity or even ideology.⁵ As I have argued for more than two decades, one reason that Middle East autocracies have endured is that they protected groups that feared their political and economic interests—and even their physical survival—could be threatened if one or more larger groups invoked electoral victories to reduce or abolish the political and economic rights of smaller group.⁶ The Sunni monarchy in Bahrain; the Alawite, Neo-Bathist rulers in Syria; the Sunni Neo-Bathists in Saddam Husayn’s Iraq; and the quasi-secular regimes in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt are all examples of autocracies that protected key identity groups in return for their loyalty—or least acquiescence—to the pillared state. As a result, both ruling elites and the groups for which they spoke came to view the survival of this protection racket as essential for their own political and even physical survival. Even modest political openings were often seen—especially by minority regimes and their allies—as an *existential threat*.

Of course, as any Mafioso knows, a well-functioning protection racket depends in part on the capacity of the protector to generate the very threat needed to justify both the provision of protection and the costs extracted for this service. Just as any store-owner in Brooklyn or North Side Chicago knows that their businesses could mysteriously burn down over night unless they pay for protection, minority Shi’ites in Kuwait, Berbers in Morocco, Copts in Egypt, and secular intellectuals in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Kuwait, and even Saudi Arabia must always consider the costs of rejecting their protectors. Thus it should come as no surprise that in the Syria of Bashar al-Asad and his father Hafiz (the “Protector of the Lion,” in English), there were plenty of Alawites who despised the regime but feared they had no alternative but to tolerate it if not support it. Protection rackets and the loyalty (or thin tolerance) that they attempt to extract *are always to some extent tacit and thus potentially brittle systems*.

It is for this reason that Arab leaders never conceived of the protection racket game as static. Unable to guarantee the ultimate loyalty of clients, Arab leaders shook up the chess board by shifting support to other groups or taking policy actions that pitted one group against the other. Thus in Jordan the late King Husayn—and even more his son Abdullah—began shifting away from the East Bank Bedouin tribes towards elements within the Palestinian business community; Hafiz al-Asad looked to bribe Sunni businessmen in Aleppo with offers of “selective reform” (to use Steven Heydemann’s term); the amirs of Kuwait secured their rule by first channeling oil-rent benefits to the urban Sunni business classes and the Shi’ite minority. They later sought to contain this modernizing sector by giving citizenship to thousands of Bedouin tribes from Saudi Arabia—groups whose leaders eventually rewarded the amirs by having the temerity to call for greater political representation. Shifting ground, that amir responded by favoring Shi’ites and liberals, while tolerating (and some argue rewarding) Sunni fundamentalist leaders—all in a bid to keep liberals and Shi’ites in line.

These identity games demonstrated the extent to which the pillaring of state power was ultimately tied to the pillaring of ethnic, religious, sectarian or ideological (secular versus Islamist) groups in Arab societies. To one extent or another, “neo-confessionalism” sub-cultures have long defined the politics not merely of Lebanon, but of all Arab states.⁷ Autocracy pivoted around a protection racket by which Arab leaders funneled protection and patronage to different identity groups in return for their loyalty, or at least their acquiescence, to ruling regimes. Thus, as William Zartman noted long ago, the lines between state and society, between rulers and opposition, were blurred.⁸ A system of manipulated and institutionalized fear stifled the formation of shared national identities, impaired or corrupted representative institutions such as parliaments, and ultimately worked against the broad opposition alliances and process of regime-opposition “pact making” that have proven so crucial to the democratization processes in the wider global arena. Thus, the bitter legacy of identity politics, undermined every Arab political rebellion in 2011-12, with the exception of Tunisia.

Constraint Number 3: Liberalized and Full Protection Racket Autocracies

The “Tunisian exception” reminds us that if the legacy of protection racket identity politics was disastrous it was not of one piece. In the Arab world’s what I have called “liberalized autocracies” played the protection racket game by creating a political field that was sufficiently pluralist, such that rival identity groups could compete for the state’s protection and patronage, but sufficiently controlled and manipulated, such that oppositions were unlikely to risk joining forces against the state—much less forging a common opposition agenda.⁹ Liberalized autocracy was a “second best” choice not merely for regimes but also for opposition leaders, many of which viewed state controlled competition as preferable to the unknowns of full democratic change and the brutality of full autocracy. By contrast, full autocracies severely limited the space for political expression, often allowing only one identity group some chance to engage in sham elections that were totally controlled by the ruling party. In Tunisia, former President Zayn al-Abidin bin Ali shut out the Islamists, offering the urban secular professional and business sector protection in return for their support or acquiescence. The Sunni monarchs of Bahrain shut out the Shi’ites, and on this basis secured the support of the minority Sunnis, just as Hafiz al-Asad crushed Islamists and ultimately depended on the Alawite (and Christian) communities for his survival.

Liberalized and full autocracies generated very different legacies that in turn helped to shape the multiple trajectories of the 2011 Arab rebellions. By reducing politics and parliamentary life to a process of peaceful coexistence between identity groups, liberalized autocracy was a “trap,” as I called it, one that did not impart the alliance-building skills and ethos of compromise essential to democratic governance. Especially where strong executives were backed by robust security sectors—as was the case in Egypt—the incentive and capacity for building democratic alliances was limited. This legacy helped the generals manipulate the opposition and reassert control after they toppled President Muhammad Mursi in July 2013. Similarly, in Kuwait Islamists, Sunni liberals, Shi’ites, and tribal leaders long ago learned how to lobby for the benefits of oil rents, thus looking to the ruling al-Sabah family—or different actors within it—for the ultimate salvation. The capacity of monarchs to stay “above the political fray”—or at least appear to be doing so—together with substantial oil revenues helped the leaders of Kuwait, Qatar, Morocco, and Jordan deflect the storm of political revolt.

As for full autocracy, its impact has depended in part on the nature of identity cleavages. In societies exhibiting deep *sectarian* divisions, such as Iraq, Syria, and Bahrain, regime leaders who had manipulated these divisions to survive deemed any political

reform as tantamount to political and physical suicide. This policy created a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it gave deeply estranged oppositions ample cause to topple regimes rather than to negotiate—and provided regimes ample cause to wipe out their opponents—as the cases of Libya, Bahrain and Syria sadly demonstrated. By contrast, in Tunisia there was an *ideological* rather than religious or sectarian divide within the urban middle class, and what is more, no strong or politicized military to serve as ultimate arbiter. As result, while Islamists and secularists espoused very different political programs, they had two basic choices: talk or fight. The fact that talking between Islamists and secularists, capitalists and socialists, liberals and Arab nationalists, began in 2005—6 years before the 2010-11 “Jasmine Revolution”—is instructive. The added benefit the *Conférence Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (or CGTT) was also crucial. A mass trade union with impeccable nationalist credentials, the CGTT was well positioned to lead the “National Dialogue” in 2012 and 2013. The conclusion of that dialogue also owes much to the positive pressure brought by regional and global actors (the US, Algeria, and the EU), and to a difficult learning process within the Tunisian political elite. Looking to their west and seeing state collapse in Libya, and off to the east in Egypt—where a military coup in August-September 2013 produced unprecedented state violence—Tunisian leaders concluded that they could not afford to fail in their quest for a new political bargain.

Obama: From Dreams of Engagement to “Not Doing Stupid Things”

By emphasizing identity conflicts, I do not mean to minimize economic factors or socio-economic conflict. Regimes throughout the Arab world used state access to domestic economic resources, as well as revenues from oil sales and strategic rents from regional and global powers, to finance what I long ago called the “ruling bargain.” But as the late Clifford Geertz once noted, the elite instrumentalization of identity conflicts injects into otherwise rational struggles over economic power and state resources an existential anxiety that becomes part of the system of politics, especially when and if a real prospect of political change emerges.¹⁰ As a result, if and when pressures from within or without pushed Arab leaders to reform—or even more so—to abandon office, the most likely outcome would be regime efforts to revive protection racket politics combined with the fragmentation of opposition groups, as some turned back to the state for protection and others defied intractable rulers. The “strong” Arab state was always a ticking time bomb.

Two US presidents have struggled in a direct and ultimately perilous way with this time bomb: George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The first was hardly aware of this bomb, and/or assumed that once Saddam Husayn’s despotic regime fell, a new democratic order would sprout from the soil of Iraqi society. When this did not happen, the Bush administration backed and then helped to institutionalize a confessional power sharing system that gave the Shi’ite population and leaders disproportionate power, and thus the chance to seek electoral, political and economic revenge on their Sunni compatriots.¹¹ While much ink has been spilled on the various “mistakes” that the Bush administration committed, *the key lesson of the Iraqi misadventure is that the US was—and remains—ill-prepared to play matchmaker or counselor in divided societies.* The problem is not merely the amount of military and other resources required to construct nations on the rubble of failed or toppled sectarian or neo-confessional systems: *the deeper challenge is to do so without being viewed by local players as merely an ally of one or more of the key conflicting groups.*

There is little doubt that Obama viewed the US effort to force political change and then serve as marriage broker as fool-hearty. This perception surely played some role in his decision to put distance between his administration and the neo-conservative ideas and actors that had inspired Bush’s Iraq venture and his subsequent “Freedom Agenda.” Thus, during the first three years of the Obama administration, he advanced a hybrid, dissonant foreign policy that mixed realism and global engagement with continued—if more low key—US democracy promotion policies. This policy sought to make liberalized autocracies more open and tolerant but in ways that would sustain their ruling establishments, all of which were friendly with Washington. But the 2011 Arab political revolts confronted Obama with a new reality for which his administration was totally unprepared. In the case of Tunisia, Egypt, and then Libya, these revolts accomplished the very regime change that US policy was still designed to avoid.

I had the chance to see the administration grapple with these unprecedented events during two White House meetings with US Middle East experts. Anecdotal evidence has its limitations, but from where I sat—and from other reports—this experience seemed to amply demonstrate that the administration’s response was a product of constant improvisation together with the inevitable bureaucratic and personal policy rivalries that went hand-in-hand with such an evolving dynamic. The administration could not get a handle on events that were moving so fast, or a clear sense of the outcome—often unintended—of its actions. In Libya, US support for the first UN Security Council Resolution in history to implicitly invoke the language R2P (Responsibility to Protect), set the stage for a “lead from behind” NATO bombing campaign that toppled what was left of Muammar Qadhafi’s regime, thus leading to the implosion of what had always been a tribally and geographically fragmented state. Well before the full destructive implications of this dynamic would fully reveal themselves in Libya, Yemen fell into internal conflict as did Syria. Syria’s tragic descent into civil war was sparked in large measure by Asad’s belief that any compromise with the Sunni majority would invite regime (Alawite) destruction and/or civil war. As both of these outcomes were unacceptable, Asad reasoned that his only available option was to smash the opposition.¹²

Obama not only failed to grasp this existential logic, he inadvertently magnified its violent logos by openly declaring that the Asad regime was on its last legs.¹³ While it is likely that Asad would have pursued his bloody path even in the absence of such provocative and premature observations from a US president, it seems to me that Obama’s remarks reinforced Asad’s determination not to endure the same gutting that Qadhafi had suffered in his last agonizing hours and minutes. Indeed, if there is any one lesson that Arab leaders took from the Arab revolts of 2011 and beyond, it was that while their states were suffering from serious legitimacy crises, any effort to fix what was not completely broken would produce state collapse. This was certainly the view of Egypt’s generals, who in the Summer of 2013 (and perhaps much earlier) concluded that newly elected President Muhammad Mursi and his allies in the Muslim Brotherhood were undertaking policies that were shaking the very foundations of one of the region’s most longstanding states—and all the pillars that supported it.¹⁴

Did Obama himself reach a similar conclusion as he watched internal conflicts escalate in Libya, Syria and Yemen, and as he watched Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia intervene in military ventures that did not stem the tide of state collapse but instead escalated it? Perhaps. Obama’s retrospective assessment may well have jived with longstanding notions about the centrifuge

of “tribal” identities. But they did not amount to a coherent doctrine that shaped his policy decisions. Those decisions were/are a response to rapidly changing events, some of which unfolded very badly, despite Obama’s *initial efforts* to respond favorably to the demands of young protestors. Indeed, reading Jeffrey Goldberg and others, there is a strong sense that Obama felt burned not only by the region and its trajectory, but also by his own decisions to facilitate former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s ouster and then to prematurely affirm the end of Assad’s reign. Frustrated with a region that refused to bend to the arc of reason as he understood it, by late 2015 Obama had focused his Middle East policy on countering (from the air, and by mid-2016, increasingly from the ground) the most dangerous example of organized religious tribalism: *Daesh*. What was missing in this policy, as Tamara Wittes has noted, was any deeper approach to addressing (much less solving) the basic political and governance challenges in Syria and Iraq that fed the *Daesh* beast in the first place.¹⁵

Après Obama

But is there an approach that will meet this challenge? Is there a doctrine, a coherent strategy, in short an answer beyond the temptations—and potential disasters—that issue from improvised foreign policy making? I am not sure. Whoever sits next in the Oval Office will have to contend with a region in which neo-confessional identity politics endures in ways that are far from democratic, but in some cases may be preferable to the identity monster represented by *Daesh*. Liberalized autocracy may be a *cul de sac* but it is not a guillotine. Thus, the next president will probably do their best to ensure that the states that survived the Arab political revolts secure a measure of internal cohesion and consensus rather than experiment with major political changes on the one side, or slip into full autocracy on the other. The challenge for Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco is to avoid the temptation of de-liberalization and instead seek real engagement with their societies. But the leaders of such societies must also overcome their own divisions, and on this score, the US—submerged in its own identity politics—is hardly well positioned to help.

What about Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and most of all bloody Syria? Here too we are unlikely to see major shifts in US policy. The slow but perhaps steady increase in US troops in Iraq may constitute something of a “slippery slope” taking Washington into yet another overseas military entanglement—or it may not. But even the wisest and most experienced of presidents, backed by a pool of seasoned experts, will find the task of treating the causes rather than the symptoms of political conflict in the Arab world daunting. Multiple tablespoons of doctrine and strategic planning may not be enough to repair the damage done to those Arab states in which the pillars of rule collapsed or were collapsed.

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Notes:

¹ Stephen McInerney and Cole Bockenfeld, *The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2017: Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights in the Middle East*, Project on Middle East Democracy, April 2016, <http://pomed.org/pomed-publications/fy17-budget-report/>.

² Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

³ Arend Lijphart, “Consociational Democracy,” *World Politics* 21, no. 2 (January 1969): 207-225, <https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2005/EUP405/lijphart69.pdf>.

⁴ John W. Schiemann, *The Politics of Pact-Making: Hungary’s Negotiated Transition to Democracy in Comparative Perspective* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2005), 10-36.

⁵ Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime” in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169-187, http://www.fd.unl.pt/docentes_docs/ma/RBR_MA_11377.pdf.

⁶ See Daniel Brumberg, “Transforming the Arab World’s Protection-Racket Politics,” *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (July 2013): 88-103, <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/transforming-arab-world%E2%80%99s-protection-racket-politics>.

⁷ Dina Shehata was one of the first scholars to illuminate the impact of neo-confessional identity politics on Egypt’s politics under Mubarak. See Dina Shehata, *Islamists and Secularists in Egypt: Opposition, Conflict & Cooperation* (Routledge, 2013).

⁸ For an excellent discussion of the enduring relevance of Zartman’s work, see: <http://www.eui.eu/documents/rscas/research/mediterranean/ws5mrm2007.pdf>.

⁹ Daniel Brumberg, “Democratization in the Arab World? The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 4 (October 2002): 56-68, <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/democratization-arab-world-trap-liberalized-autocracy>.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Politics in the New States,” in *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. Clifford Geertz (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1963), 105-157, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265030312_The_Integrative_Revolution_Primordial_Sentiments_and_Civil_Politics_in_New_States.

¹¹ Lise Morjé Howard, “The Ethnocracy Trap,” *Journal of Democracy* 23, no.4 (October 2012): 155-169.

¹² Three weeks before Obama’s was first inaugurated president, I traveled with a USIP-Stimson Center delegation to Syria and met with Assad for nearly two hours. He asserted that “Syria will never be a Lebanon,” and that his power and authority were the central guarantees of state cohesion.

¹³ Scott Wilson and Joby Warrick, “Assad must go, Obama says,” *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must-go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ_story.html.

¹⁴ See Daniel Brumberg, “The Resurgence of the Egyptian State,” *Foreign Policy*, July 8, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/08/the-resurgence-of-the-egyptian-state/>.

¹⁵ Tamara Cofman Wittes, “The slipperiest slope of them all,” *The Brookings Institution*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2016/03/15-slippery-slope-middle-east-wittes>.