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The New Arab Era: the Muslim Brotherhood, the Sadrists and Hezbollah—united

In Lebanon, Hezbollah has been transformed from a fringe militia seizing Western hostages into the country's predominant political force, capable of displacing a pro-Western cabinet with a coalition of its own making. Moqtada al-Sadr has gone from being a "wanted man" to the kingmaker of Iraqi politics. Tunisia's Zine el Abidine ben Ali, long a model of the liberalizing autocrat who introduced economic reforms, promoted a moderate strain of Islam and appeared open to co-existence with Israel, was overthrown. With Rachid Ghannouchi, the head of the formerly banned En-Nahda movement, having returned to his homeland from exile, and likely to contest elections, the prospects of yet another Islamist movement entering government—sharing Hezbollah's and the Sadrists' opposition to the U.S. peace process and its "war on terror"—must be taken as a likely prospect. Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, America's closest partner in the Arab world for the last three decades, could be on his last legs, and the Muslim Brotherhood—the most organized political opposition in the country—is likely to play a greater role in shaping policy. In both Yemen and Jordan—two U.S. allies who have supported America's war on terror—governments are facing protests. Ali Abdullah Saleh, the president of Yemen, is frantically trying to craft new policies designed to appease his country's underemployed youth, while Jordan's King Abdullah dismissed his prime minister, Samir Rifai and asked Marouf Al Bakhit to form a new government, while the Islamic Action Front—the Jordanian version of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, called for a "directly elected" government responsible to a freely-elected parliament, not one appointed by the monarch.



"Pressure from below" throughout the Arab world, however, is likely to fundamentally change the policies adopted by Middle Eastern governments, regardless as to whether existing regimes can successfully find an accommodation with restive populations or are overthrown. And while the specter of radical Islamism is real, it is also important to note that opposition to the U.S. program for the Middle East cuts across various ideological boundaries to unite Arabs across the spectrum, from secularists to Islamists. Back in 2003, Ray Takeyh and I, examining the question of how a more democratic Middle East might conduct its relations with the United States, observed: "[T]he foremost priority of democratizing regional states would be the plight of

the Palestinians, an issue that has long scarred the region's consciousness. Progressive liberals such as the Wafd party in Egypt have usually put forth the loudest denunciations of America's "double standards" vis-a`-vis Israel and the Palestinians. In a similar vein, such states ... would see no rationale for continuing to accommodate America's military installations, peace compacts, and effortless mandating of regime changes wherever Washington perceives an unsavory leader who is not conforming to its norms. In essence, Arab democracies would seek what they perceived to be equitable and fair relations with the United States, but object to the cumbersome American imperial demands, especially regarding Israel. This is not a clash of civilizations, but a nationalistic defiance of a [global power's priorities](#) .”

In the following eight years, nothing has changed that would challenge the conclusions that we reached about the likely trajectory of the Middle East peace process if Arab states became more accountable to their populations: “Although more democratically inclined Middle Eastern states would be less likely to defy the strategic correlation of forces or to wage fruitless and defeating open wars against Israel, they would be more likely to abort any progress toward further accommodation. ... One is hard-pressed to find a single meaningful opposition party or movement in the Middle East—even those that are avowedly secular and progressive—prone to accepting peace with Israel. In the two states that have enacted formal treaties with Israel, popular opinion is strongly hostile to such obligations. In Jordan, the IAF backs abrogation of the 1994 peace treaty, while in Egypt ... the public remains deeply antagonistic to the Israeli state. ... The prevailing cold peace between Israel and the Arab states will likely be transformed into a cold war, with its own corollary suspicions, tensions, and arms races. The American and Israeli dream of normalization and integration of Israel in a democratic Middle East does not appear to be rooted in reality—indeed, all indicators suggest that democratic Arab regimes would find it even harder to participate in a peace process closely scripted by Washington.” Fast forward to today, and there is a strong likelihood that a post-Mubarak regime in Egypt would stop active enforcement of the blockade of the Gaza strip—a key pillar of the strategy to try and isolate Hamas; a more accountable Jordanian government would be less willing to exert itself to tap down developments in the West Bank; any government in Iraq where Moqtada al-Sadr is influential will certainly not be recognizing Israel anytime soon, as so many American statesmen hoped would happen after Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003; and the likelihood of Lebanon ever disarming Hezbollah or revoking its legal status in Lebanon as a legitimate “armed resistance movement” due to the continuing dispute over the Shebaa Farms is nil. With a “state of Palestine” now enjoying formal recognition from several countries in the world—a slow drift towards a Kosovo-style unilateral proclamation of statehood is now underway. All of this could lay the groundwork for a third intifada which would seriously erode the ability of both Israel and the United States to set the parameters for the peace process, by presenting both Jerusalem and Washington with new “facts on the ground.”

Iran may also be on the verge of receiving a new lifeline. Arab regimes were lined up against Tehran; their populations may be less concerned, however, with stopping the Iranian nuclear program at all costs. The transformation of Iranian-Turkish relations over the last several years

Autocrats 'R Us

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highlights the possibility that the American strategy of containing Tehran and concentrating diplomatic and economic pressure on the regime of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have reached its high point this last summer. If so, then multiple clocks are running: can the U.S. sustain the pressure on Iran sufficient to cause the regime to crack (or be overthrown from within) before Iran crosses the nuclear finish line?



Some of the debate in the U.S. has focused on worries that if U.S.-backed autocrats fall, the only alternative must be radical Islamists. This misses a more critical point. Even if the Jordan's IAF, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood or Tunisia's En-Nahda moves more in the moderate direction trailblazed by Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP)—Ghannouchi explicitly cites the AKP as his model for Tunisia—that will be of significant concern to Washington, given how Turkey in recent years has backed away from its formerly close relations with Israel and has been open to reaching an accommodation with Iran.

Hayat Alvi [argues](#), “US policymakers realize that the world is changing in unprecedented ways and the status quo policies originating in the Cold War era no longer apply.” The U.S. effort to encourage the status quo regimes of its Arab allies to modernize their economies and provide opportunities for the hard-pressed middle class and a disillusioned youth has run out of time. Learning to cope with a new Middle East—one where Hezbollah, the Sadrists, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Action Front all are influential and have a say in policy—is the challenge that the Obama administration will have to navigate.

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