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### **Fall of Western-Supported Dictatorships in the Middle East and North Africa: A New Beginning**

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After decades of Western-supported dictatorships in the Middle East and North Africa, middle class secular Arabs, specifically young men, women, and especially students, have risen up against their corrupt and repressive governments. This unprecedented protest movement has united people from different regions, classes, and religious backgrounds across North Africa and the Middle East. This uprising, beginning in Tunisia, quickly spread like wildfire to Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Jordan, Bahrain, and Syria. The demands of the people, who number in the millions, have been very clear and simple: freedom and democracy.

This article reviews the history of the Middle East after World War I, the Arab people and their culture and how it affects the nature of their politics. It then argues that the fall of these Western-supported regimes is a defeat to Al-Qaeda's ideology and has given Western countries another chance to invest in the Middle East's people and infrastructure for their mutual benefit.

### **Culture and Lifestyles of the Peoples of the Middle East**

Language, which differentiates the Middle Eastern peoples, and religion which unites them, are predominant elements of cultural identity in the Middle East. The major languages of the region, which correspond to the four main ethnic groups, are Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, and Persian. Arabic is the most widely used language. Kurdish is related to Persian and is spoken in northern Iraq, Iran, and eastern Turkey. Hebrew spoken in Israel is, like Arabic, a Semitic tongue. Educated people throughout the Middle East frequently speak English or French as well.

Islam, the religion of the Muslims, is the predominant faith of the Middle East. There are two main branches: Sunni Islam, the larger branch; and Shia Islam, the smaller branch that is found mainly in Iran, Bahrain, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. Christianity is practiced by a minority of Arabs, particularly in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.

No more than 10 percent of the people of the region have ever followed the nomadic way of life, represented by the desert Bedouin, and even fewer do so today. Early civilization in the Middle East was centered on agriculture, and the majority of the people still earn their livelihood as settled farmers.

At one time most of the region's people inhabited villages or small towns, living and working as their ancestors had done for centuries. This lifestyle has changed dramatically, perhaps as a result of globalization, as increasing numbers of people have been drawn to the cities, where approximately half the population of the region now resides.

### **Historical Context**

#### Wahhabi Islam and the Middle East

Wahhabism is a religious movement within Sunni Islam based on the 18th century teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an Islamic scholar who advocated the purging of Islam of "impurities," including Western influences. The movement spread like wildfire in the Middle East; Wahhabism is the dominant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia. It has developed considerable influence in the Muslim world in part through Saudi funding of mosques, schools (madrassas), and social programs. The primary Wahhabi doctrine is Tawhid, the uniqueness and unity of God. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, its founder, was influenced by the writings of Ibn Taymiyya, and questioned classical interpretations of Islam while claiming to rely on the Quran and the Hadith (sayings and actions of Muhammad). Abd al-Wahhab attacked a "perceived moral decline and political weakness" in the Arabian Peninsula and condemned what he *labeled* as idolatry, the popular cult of saints, and shrine and tomb visitation. The terms Wahhabi and Salafi (as well as ahl al-hadith, people of hadith) are often used interchangeably, but Wahhabi has also been called "a particular orientation within Salafism," that many consider as ultra-conservative.

In 1740, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was invited to settle in a town called Diriyya by its ruler Muhammad ibn Saud, whose brothers had been students of al-Wahhab. Upon arriving in Diriyya, a pact was made between Ibn Saud and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, by which Ibn Saud pledged to implement and enforce Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings, while Ibn Saud and his family would remain the temporal "leaders" of the movement.

Because of the desire to purge of any possible sites of idolatry, in 1801 and 1802, the Saudi Wahhabis under Abdul Aziz ibn Muhammad Saud captured the holy Shia cities of Karbala and Najaf in

Iraq, massacred parts of the Shia population, and destroyed the tombs of Hussain ibn Ali, the grandson of Muhammad. In 1803 and 1804, the Saudis captured Mecca and Medina and destroyed historical monuments and various holy Muslim sites and shrines such as the shrine built over the tomb of Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad. They even intended to destroy the grave of Muhammad himself, labeling it as idolatrous. In 1998, the Saudis bulldozed and poured gasoline over the grave of Amina bint Wahb, the mother of Prophet Muhammad, causing resentment throughout the Muslim world. Now many Muslim and Islamic organizations such as the Islamic Supreme Council of America classify Wahhabism as extremist and heretical, based mainly on Wahhabism's rejection of traditional Sunni scholars and their interpretations.

Osama Bin Laden, founder of Al-Qaeda was not considered to be a true follower of Wahhabi Islam. However, he was nurtured in the Wahhabi tradition and developed an independent theology that is not totally inconsistent with its tenets. Many of his followers including most of the 9/11 hijackers were originally Wahhabis, and many of the madrassas that turn out Al-Qaeda members are financed by Wahhabi movement.

### The World Wars and Post-War Period

After World War I, the fall of the Ottoman Empire paved the way for the rising European colonial powers interested in securing territory in the Middle East and North Africa. Both France and Great Britain sought to control resources in these territories, primarily oil, under the guise of League of Nations mandates. It is ironic that during the war, the British and French promised the Arabs full independence from the Ottoman Turks if they fought with them against the Ottoman Army. The Arabs agreed to aid the British defeat the Ottomans. However, after the war, the colonial powers not only failed to deliver their promises but also carved Arab land into artificial countries under the doctrine of “divide and rule.” This doctrine resulted in the creation of many small Arab states, and produced many of today’s problems in the Middle East and North Africa.

In the early 20th Century, the Wahhabist-oriented Al-Saud dynasty conquered and unified the various provinces on the Arabian Peninsula and founded the modern day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Vast wealth from oil discovered in the following decades, coupled with Saudi control of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, have since provided a base and funding for Wahhabi missionary activity around the world. The Saudi government also established the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, a religious police unit, to enforce Wahhabi rules of behavior.

To justify the occupation of Arab land by Western governments, Western populations have been exposed to propaganda and negative stereotyping of the Arabs, especially under European colonialism as explained by Edward Said in his well-respected book, *Orientalism*. This negative image of the Arabs has served to provide justifications for involvement in Middle Eastern politics, the procurement of oil, and ensuring regional “stability” for the “national interests” of the Western powers.

To maintain superiority, control, and influence over the Middle East and North Africa after World War II, the West has supported corrupt Arab leaders and sought the overthrow of those that are not seen as favorable to them. This strategy has also served to keep their populations at bay, increasing militarization and the power and personal wealth of the elite. Sometimes this approach has been used in the name of fighting communism when indeed the common theme underlying this stratagem has been the struggle to control access to important resources such as oil.

## Al-Qaeda and Its Doctrine

The terrorist organization Al-Qaeda was founded by Osama Bin Laden, a Saudi, in 1988 in the aftermath of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. The stated goals of Al-Qaeda, with parallels to the Wahhabi movement, are to end U.S. military presence in the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula, overthrow Arab regimes that are corrupt and insufficiently religious, and end American support for Israel. Al-Qaeda called for the use of violence against civilians and the military of the United States and any of its allies, using the Quran as a supposed justification. Since its formation, Al Qaeda has committed a number of terrorist acts in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, the United States and Asia. Although Al-Qaeda was once supported by the Taliban in Afghanistan, the U.S. and British governments have never considered the Taliban to be a terrorist organization.

The death of Osama Bin Laden on May 1, 2011 by the American Special Forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan is a defining moment in the American-led war on terrorism. The fate of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Al-Qaeda leader number two in command, is still unclear. What remains to be seen is whether the death of Bin Laden galvanizes his followers to conduct more attacks, or whether it demoralizes the remaining leadership of Al-Qaeda and severely weakens his terrorist movement.

## **Current Turmoil in the Middle East**

Most agree that the main reasons for this massive uprising in the Middle East and North Africa have been government corruption, lack of jobs for the educated middle class, and the availability of electronic media and the internet including cellular phones and social media sites such as YouTube, FaceBook, and Twitter.

In Tunisia, the revolution started in December 2010, when a street fruit vendor set himself on fire, killing himself to protest government corruption. The resulting Tunisian revolution galvanized young people in other Middle Eastern countries to take to the streets to protest against rampant unemployment, police brutality, inflation, and repressive governments. Both in Egypt and Tunisia, the new presence of a large number of college-educated youth willing to fight for their rights angered by the lack of job opportunities and by repressive police states, was the main factor contributing to this revolution.

In Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain, bloody battles have been raging between the government and opposition forces. In Libya, Colonel Gadhafi's forces have pounded Misrata with rockets, a western city that is in the hands of the rebel forces. On April 15, 2011, the Human Rights Watch group claimed that Gadhafi's forces have been using cluster bombs – munitions that have been banned in most countries. But the people of Libya, inspired by Tunisia's successful revolution, are continually fighting back.

As of April 16, 2011, bowing to pressure from a popular uprising, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad acknowledged that the Syrian people have legitimate grievances and promised to end the fifty years of emergency rule. Thousands of protesters took to the streets before and after Assad's speech in a sign that his promises were not acceptable to the people; indeed, they did not believe him. Syria's emergency laws have been in place since the ruling Ba'ath party came to power in 1963, giving the Syrian regime authority to arrest and detain people without any charge, and extending state authority into virtually every aspect of life. Like Gadhafi, Assad may be ill-disposed to exercise restraint in the face of revolution after having observed the results of restraint in Tunisia and Egypt.

## **Possible Futures for the Arab World**

For the most part, the U.S. and the Western governments have supported undemocratic, repressive regimes in the Middle East, *but only* in return for the smooth flow of oil and a clampdown on terrorism. Some of these regimes have already been toppled (Tunisia and Egypt) and the others (Libya and Yemen) face grave risk of overthrow. There is no certainty as to what will fill the vacuum: a military government, a religious state, true democracy, or something in between. Egypt is a special concern to the U.S. and

other Western governments because currently, it is the only Arabic state to officially forge a peace deal with Israel.

Based on the history of other Muslim countries around the Middle East such as Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia, a number of scenarios are possible. In all these countries except Iran, democracy has finally taken hold but only after a very long time. The revolution in Iran that was led mainly by the students and the middle class gave them strict theocracy rather than true democracy. Based on this history, the possible scenarios for the countries of the Middle East and North Africa are:

1. A failed state with interethnic strife, possibly becoming a terrorist breeding ground, e.g. Afghanistan and Somalia.
2. A military, tribal, or theocratic dictatorship, e.g. Pakistan
3. A viable democracy, e.g. Indonesia and Malaysia
4. Peaceful or less peaceful “fission” into two or more nations, e.g. Libya

In a given Arab nation, various factors will influence which scenario emerges. One factor is the nation’s institutions and structures or lack thereof, e.g., civil service, trade unions, political parties, parliament, military, a landed aristocracy, a middle class, and tribal composition and structure. In addition, some of these countries have artificial boundaries since they were created as part of the British and French mandates, and their peoples have no shared history or identity. Iraq is such a country, as it is a nation of diverse nationalities where it was easy to start sectarian violence.

For the U.S., the current events in the Middle East will test the special relationship it has with most of the Arab countries. Without careful and attentive management by the U.S., this relationship could be entirely swept away, in the process destroying a keystone of U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa. Given the centrality of Egypt to the politics of the region, the consequences would seriously damage U.S. interests in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf.

### **Revolutions Then and Now**

In the past, revolutions have overthrown centuries-old regimes and empires, brought new and powerful ideas into the forefront of politics, created new nations, and brought ordinary people into the public arena. The world has been shaped by these upheavals. In the last century, we saw the fall of the colonial powers, Nazism, Fascism, and Communism.

Since its creation in 1988, Al Qaeda's principal mission has been to topple what it calls the “near enemy” regimes ruling Arab states that don't apply fundamentalist Islamic law. Egypt, a close U.S. ally, was a particular priority, especially for the group's second in command, Egyptian Ayman al Zawahiri, who was imprisoned there for his role in the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat. But in less than three weeks, an unarmed group of protesters succeeded where Al-Qaeda failed, toppling the government of Hosni Mubarak.

Terrorism analysts believe Al-Qaeda's senior leadership is deeply puzzled by this massive uprising. In many ways, the largely nonviolent, secular, and pro-democracy revolts amount to a rejection of the group's core beliefs and ideology. How significant a blow Al-Qaeda will take from the current unrest will be in part determined by how the leaders of the Middle East adapt. A harsh crackdown from the remaining regimes could fuel the group's narrative of oppression. A swift and successful transition to democracy, particularly in Egypt, could do much the opposite. Additionally, the unrest in Libya could provide an opening for extremist Islamists, such as the Wahhabis and Salafis in the eastern part of the country, to reassert themselves.

Most experts believe that the uprising has been a short-term catastrophe for Al-Qaeda – a catastrophe that has overshadowed the regular terrorist attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan – but caution that the fall of Arab dictators won't end Al-Qaeda's appeal unless the Western countries are willing to help these countries with economic assistance.

## Conclusion

The progress of the Western world can be attributed to its own political revolutions. The question now is whether we are seeing a revolution in the Arab world that will presage a new era of freedom of thought, economic development, and a modernization of science and technology, or whether the revolution will lead to the failure of these nascent democracies and takeovers by new groups of civilian or military dictators.

After World War II, the U.S. developed the Marshall Plan (European Recovery Plan) for the economic development of Western Europe to rebuild its infrastructure and economy that was almost completely destroyed by war. It is because of this ambitious economic plan that the countries of Western Europe quickly restored their industries, their economies, and their financial well-being that have lasted for a lifetime.

A Marshall Plan for the Arab countries can bring economic development, modern industrial and business practices, prosperity, and long lasting peace in this important part of the world. The new economic development plan, if initiated, can reduce artificial barriers and instill a sense of hope and self-reliance. As a parallel action, the U.S. and the West can attempt to convince various governments in the region to establish democracies and to recognize freedom for all of their peoples.

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**POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM** (send comments to [forum@futuretakes.org](mailto:forum@futuretakes.org) or post on FUTUREtakes blog):

- Identify other possible scenarios for the nations of Southwest Asia (the Middle East) and North Africa in addition to those outlined by the authors. Also identify trends, "wild cards" (unforeseen, discontinuous events), and other factors that can lead to the scenarios that you identify.
- Under what conditions have revolutions started at the grassroots level? Which revolutions have started at other levels (e.g., intellectual revolutions), and why? At what levels might revolutions in the future be expected to start, and why?
- Assuming uncensored access to social media, under what social, political, and cultural conditions are they most effective in initiating social change, and why?