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MES Notes

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Was the Egyptian Coup "Exceptional"?

by Shadi Hamid

This article will consider a "puzzle": How could those who claimed to support and believe in democracy turn against it so quickly? I was in Tahrir Square on 11 February 2011, the day that Husni Mubarak, Egypt's strongman of 30 years, fell, as hundreds of thousands of Egyptians gathered in protest. It was, for me, one of those once-in-a-lifetime moments. More importantly, it suggested that what we assumed about "authoritarian durability" in the Middle East might have been overstated.

If I had to pick one day that marked the definitive end of the Arab Spring, it would be 14 August 2013, the day of the Rabaa massacre, what Human Rights Watch called "the worst mass killing in modern [Egyptian] history."[1] Tens of thousands of supporters of the President Muhammad Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood had assembled in the middle of Cairo, protesting the military coup of 3 July 2013 and insisting they would not leave the sit-in until Mursi was reinstated.

For its part, the military was threatening to move in with brute force. It was only a question of when exactly it would happen and just how bad it would be. The fact that it did happen and that the numbers killed and injured far exceeded expectations raised a set of fascinating—and frightening—questions about the fragility of democratic transitions and the quick erosions of norms against the use of violence. And then there was that age-old question: how do otherwise good people come to support terrible things?

Egypt is what we might call a "hard case," in the sense that it would appear, unlike say Iraq or Syria, to be less susceptible to the kind of violence and internecine conflict mentioned above. Egypt, one of the least artificial Arab states, has had a relatively well-formed sense of state-ness or "Egyptian-ness." The idea of the Egyptian state, with its attendant bureaucratic largesse, predated Egyptian independence. Religiously, Egypt was more homogenous than many of its neighbors with Sunni Muslims forming around 90 percent of the population.

Yet despite these advantages—and despite quite recent memories of cross-ideological cooperation during the 2011 uprising—fledgling and fragile democratic norms (and more established norms around peaceful participation) rapidly eroded in less than two and a half years.

Democracy is always nice in theory, particular in the pre-2011 era when surveys didn't necessarily

dig—or need to dig—into what people *really* meant by democracy. It seemed that Arabs, like everyone else and perhaps more than anyone else, believed or said they believed that "democracy" was the best available form of government. Democracy, as a word, had become a convenient stand-in for anything that was good. It was nice in theory, and if a polling outfit had conducted a poll in mid-2013 —on the eve of democratic breakdown—you probably would have still had a large enough group saying that they still supported democracy. But democracy in theory and democracy in practice are very different things, particularly if you're an Egyptian liberal who has to live with the consequences of elections, elections in which Islamist parties were the most likely to do well. Even if Islamists didn't do as well as expected, democracy would require that elected leaders, Islamist or otherwise, be responsive to popular sentiment, and, in a religiously conservative country, that sentiment suggested more, not less, religion in politics. This is what we might call "Islamism without Islamists," a phenomenon which I discuss in my new book *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World*.[2]

Here, again, we return to the issue of norms. When someone we really don't like wins an election here in the United States, we may get angry, we may get sad (and threaten to leave for Canada), but we learn to live with it because we believe, as Americans, that our system—and our institutions—are strong enough to withstand any ensuing polarizations or threats to the foundations of the American state. The question in much of the Middle East is: what if you're not willing to live with it because state institutions aren't resilient and you're worried that the party you hate—the party that threatens not just the policies you believe in but the way you live, how you dress, or what you drink—may alter the very nature of the state, and irrevocably so?

The Egyptian coup was in some ways exceptional, if we compare it to other notable examples of extreme ideological polarization and military intervention into politics—such as the overthrow in Chile of the democratically elected Salvador Allende in 1973. In Chile, those who called themselves "liberals" were divided. Some supported the coup, but some didn't. (Even those who initially supported it, like the Christian Democrats, came to regret their decision and joined the opposition to General Augusto Pinochet's rule).

What is interesting about Egypt, in contrast, is that there was no such division. Almost every single prominent liberal figure—with perhaps two or three exceptions—backed the military coup and the vast majority supported the ensuing massacre, some of them cheering it on rather enthusiastically. This suggests a higher, more inelastic degree of polarization than what we saw in Chile with almost no one in between: It's not so much that the center couldn't hold. It's that there was no center in the first place.

In Latin American contexts, countries were polarized and there was considerable violence (including during Argentina's "dirty war"), but ultimately the primary cleavage in these societies was largely economic in nature. There were socialists who believed in certain things about the organization of the economy and then there were far-right neo-liberals, who were more than willing to subvert democratic processes to block the Left from power. They hated each other, but the divides were, in large part, "tangible." "On matters of economic policy and social expenditures you can always split the difference," the political scientist Dankwart Rustow once wrote, decades before the Arab revolutions.[3] How do you split the middle on religion and identity? It's not something you can touch, feel, or measure. It's almost metaphysical, which is why efforts to get Islamists and secularists to actually resolve their differences in Egypt weren't just challenging; they were almost beside the point.

It is tempting to see this struggle, one which seems inseparable from the events which started in 2011, as something "new." At the center of the chasm between Islamists, on one hand, and liberals and secularists, on the other, is a raw, existential divide over the most basic of things, namely the meaning, nature, and purpose of the nation state. One of the most challenging of these foundational questions revolves around the role of religion in public life and the problem of religion and state more broadly. For example, should the state be ideologically and religiously neutral or should it be entrusted promoting a particular conception of the Good? In a sense, what we are seeing today in the post-Arab Spring era of seemingly endless conflict is only the latest iteration of an ongoing struggle to establish

legitimate political order in the region, a struggle which has remained unresolved since the formal abolition of the last caliphate, the Ottoman caliphate, in 1924. This, in other words, is not “new,” but what is new is that democratic openings have brought these tensions, conflicts, and divides to the fore in a way they hadn’t been before.

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Egypt Notes:

[1] Human Rights Watch, “UN Human Rights Council: Adoption of the UPR Report on Egypt,” March 20, 2015, http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/20/un-human-rights-council-adoption-upr-report-egypt; See also Human Rights Watch, “Egypt: Security Forces Used Excessive Lethal Force,” August 19, 2013, http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/19/egypt-security-forces-used-excessive-lethal-force.

[2] See Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016).

[3] Dankwart A. Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics* 2 (April 1970): 359.

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JCPOA and Future of US-Iran Relations[1]

by Amin Tarzi

During his initial presidential campaign in 2007-08, Barack Obama repeatedly declared his intention to improve US-Iran relations, and he followed that path after taking office. However, President Obama took a different approach than his predecessors. Previous US-Iran engagements maintained the US-stated intention of changing the nature of the Islamic regime in Iran and seeking global improvement on a host of issues while keeping the threat of military force ever-present. After the experiences in Afghanistan and especially in Iraq, President Obama was moving the United States away from a policy of forcing unsavory regimes through military power to fall in line with Washington’s policies or desires. As such, President Obama sought to assure not only the Iranian people but also its leadership that Washington’s intention was not to alter the nature of the Islamic Republic, but rather to engage the leadership in Tehran through dialogue and multilateralism. He narrowed the topic, as well, to that of encouraging behavior change on the very specific issue of nuclear fuel enrichment. The US president’s policy approach to Iran’s nuclear question may be the best applied example of what is becoming known as the Obama Doctrine.

Despite President Obama’s demarches of goodwill, the regime in Iran in the early years of Obama’s presidency was not receptive to any serious dialogue with the United States, no matter who was at the helm in Washington. The exceedingly confrontational international posture adopted by Tehran during the presidency of Mahmud Ahmadinejad along with increasing human rights abuses inside Iran, however, allowed the United States to gather a hitherto unseen multilateral coalition to bring political and economic pressure on Iran.

In Iran’s presidential elections of June 2013, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, learning from his ill-fated open support of Ahmadinejad, did not mettle in the process, endorsing candidates whose

ideas most closely aligned with his own or undermining the electoral process. This opened the door for longtime regime insider, Hasan Ruhani, to gain the presidency. With Khamenei's cautious blessing, President Ruhani's political platform broke with the past and sought to engage the West with moderation to break the coordinated international sanctions, improve his country's economy, and, ultimately, improve the survivability of the regime.

US-Iran Relations After the Nuclear Deal

For the United States, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal is formally known, has showcased the effectiveness of the core of President Obama's foreign policy, namely that through multilateralism and diplomacy, sticky international problems can be resolved and without military intervention. In this case, the JCPOA resulted in diminished Iranian ability to enrich nuclear fuel for military purposes, and the United States averted another military entanglement in the Middle East. The JCPOA has limited the ability of Tehran for 15 years to enrich uranium beyond 3.67 percent or to produce weapons-grade plutonium. As such, Iran's breakout timeline has been extended from roughly 3 months to at least a year, should Tehran decide to renege on its obligations under the JCPOA. Thus, the United States, working through an international partnership, has most likely averted the possibility of a military engagement with Iran over this issue. A victory, yes.

A bit problematic, however, is that the deal only slowed, not removed, the capability, and it does not cover Iran's quest to enhance its technological expertise to produce more accurate and longer-range delivery systems for potential nuclear weapons in the future or to design warheads capable of accommodating nuclear devices. In October 2016, Iran tested a newer version of its Shehab-3 intermediate-range ballistic missile named Emad. If Emad, in fact, is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead as suggested by observers, it would constitute a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2231. In March 2016, Iran tested two versions of Qadr ballistic missiles and claimed a successful strike on a target 1,400 kilometers away. Additionally, at least one Iranian media outlet reported that one of the missiles carried a message about Israel's destruction in Hebrew, raising fears about the resumption of Iran's confrontational posture.[2]

Furthermore, the JCPOA has not led to improved relations with the United States. Khamenei, fearing what he terms the soft power of the United States designed to undermine the nature of the Islamic regime, has banned any contacts with the US on any matter not related to the JCPOA and has ordered against making commercial deals with US firms. In regional issues ranging from Syria to Saudi Arabia and dealing with ISIL, Tehran has adopted a more nonconformist posture.

The script has not been written for what lies ahead in terms of US-Iranian relations. Iran will be expected to abide by the JCPOA, yes. Beyond that, the future depends on several factors, including but not limited to Iran's internal political wrangling, the health of Khamenei and his eventual successor, Tehran's choice of roles play in the Syria conflict and in the fight against the ISIL, and the upcoming US presidential elections.

Iran-US Notes:

[1] An earlier version of this piece has been published in Turkish as "İran'ın Nükleer Anlaşması ve Obama Doktrini" *Analist*, (Ankara, USAK, March 2016).

[2] Fars News Agency, "Shelik-e 2 favand mushak 'Qadr H' ba samt-e ahdaf-e 1400 kilometri dar savahel-e Makran+tasavir" 19/12/1394 (9 March 2016), http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13941219000106 (accessed 25 March 2016).

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