

The Barbarians Within Our Gates

Arab civilization has collapsed. It won't recover in my lifetime.

By HISHAM MELHEM September 18, 2014

With his decision to use force against the violent extremists of the Islamic State, President Obama is doing more than to knowingly enter a quagmire. He is doing more than play with the fates of two half-broken countries—Iraq and Syria—whose societies were gutted long before the Americans appeared on the horizon. Obama is stepping once again—and with understandably great reluctance—into the chaos of an entire civilization that has broken down.

Arab civilization, such as we knew it, is all but gone. The Arab world today is more violent, unstable, fragmented and driven by extremism—the extremism of the rulers and those in opposition—than at any time since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a century ago. Every hope of modern Arab history has been betrayed. The promise of political empowerment, the return of politics, the restoration of human dignity heralded by the season of Arab uprisings in their early heydays—all has given way to civil wars, ethnic, sectarian and regional divisions and the reassertion of absolutism, both in its military and atavistic forms. With the dubious exception of the antiquated monarchies and emirates of the Gulf—which for the moment are holding out against the tide of chaos—and possibly Tunisia, there is no recognizable legitimacy left in the Arab world.

Is it any surprise that, like the vermin that take over a ruined city, the heirs to this self-destroyed civilization should be the nihilistic thugs of the Islamic State? And that there is no one else who can clean up the vast mess we Arabs have made of our world but the Americans and Western countries? No one paradigm or one theory can explain what went wrong in the Arab world in the last century. There is no obvious set of reasons for the colossal failures of all the ideologies and political movements that swept the Arab region: Arab nationalism, in its Baathist and Nasserite forms; various Islamist movements; Arab socialism; the rentier state and rapacious monopolies, leaving in their wake a string of broken societies. No one theory can explain the marginalization of Egypt, once the center of political and cultural

gravity in the Arab East, and its brief and tumultuous experimentation with peaceful political change before it reverted back to military rule.

Nor is the notion of “ancient sectarian hatreds” adequate to explain the frightening reality that along a front stretching from Basra at the mouth of the Persian Gulf to Beirut on the Mediterranean there exists an almost continuous bloodletting between Sunni and Shia—the public manifestation of an epic geopolitical battle for power and control pitting Iran, the Shia powerhouse, against Saudi Arabia, the Sunni powerhouse, and their proxies.

There is no one single overarching explanation for that tapestry of horrors in Syria and Iraq, where in the last five years more than a quarter of a million people perished, where famed cities like Aleppo, Homs and Mosul were visited by the modern terror of Assad’s chemical weapons and the brutal violence of the Islamic State. How could Syria tear itself apart and become—like Spain in the 1930s—the arena for Arabs and Muslims to re-fight their old civil wars? The war waged by the Syrian regime against civilians in opposition areas combined the use of Scud missiles, anti-personnel barrel bombs as well as medieval tactics against towns and neighborhoods such as siege and starvation. For the first time since the First World War, Syrians were dying of malnutrition and hunger.

Iraq’s story in the last few decades is a chronicle of a death foretold. The slow death began with Saddam Hussein’s fateful decision to invade Iran in September 1980. Iraqis have been living in purgatory ever since with each war giving birth to another. In the midst of this suspended chaos, the U.S. invasion in 2003 was merely a catalyst that allowed the violent chaos to resume in full force.

The polarizations in Syria and Iraq—political, sectarian and ethnic—are so deep that it is difficult to see how these once-important countries could be restored as unitary states. In Libya, Muammar al-Qaddafi’s 42-year reign of terror rendered the country politically desolate and fractured its already tenuous unity. The armed factions that inherited the exhausted country have set it on the course of breaking up—again, unsurprisingly—along tribal and regional fissures. Yemen has all the ingredients of a failed state: political,

sectarian, tribal, north-south divisions, against the background of economic deterioration and a depleted water table that could turn it into the first country in the world to run out of drinking water.

Bahrain is maintaining a brittle status quo by the force of arms of its larger neighbors, mainly Saudi Arabia. Lebanon, dominated by Hezbollah, arguably the most powerful non-state actor in the world—before the rise of the Islamic State—could be dragged fully to the maelstrom of Syria’s multiple civil wars by the Assad regime, Iran and its proxy Hezbollah as well as the Islamic State.

A byproduct of the depredation of the national security state and resurgent Islamism has been the slow death of the cosmopolitanism that distinguished great Middle Eastern cities like Alexandria, Beirut, Cairo and Damascus. Alexandria was once a center of learning and multicultural delights (by night, Mark Twain wrote in *Innocents Abroad*, “it was a sort of reminiscence of Paris”). Today Alexandria is a hotbed of political Islam, now that the once large Greek-Egyptian community has fled along with the other non-Arab and non-Muslim communities. Beirut, once the most liberal city in the Levant, is struggling to maintain a modicum of openness and tolerance while being pushed by Hezbollah to become a Tehran on the Med. Over the last few decades, Islamists across the region have encouraged—and pressured—women to wear veils, men to show signs of religiosity, and subtly and not-so-subtly intimidated non-conformist intellectuals and artists. Egypt today is bereft of good universities and research centers, while publishing unreadable newspapers peddling xenophobia and hyper-nationalism. Cairo no longer produces the kind of daring and creative cinema that pioneers like the critically acclaimed director Youssef Chahine made for more than 60 years. Egyptian society today cannot tolerate a literary and intellectual figure like Taha Hussein, who towered over Arab intellectual life from the 1920s until his death in 1973, because of his skepticism about Islam. Egyptian society cannot reconcile itself today to the great diva Asmahan (1917-1944) singing to her lover that “my soul, my heart, and my body are in your hand.” In the Egypt of today, a chanteuse like Asmahan would be hounded and banished from the country.

The jihadists of the Islamic State, in other words, did not emerge from

nowhere. They climbed out of a rotting, empty hulk—what was left of a broken-down civilization. They are a gruesome manifestation of a deeper malady afflicting Arab political culture, which was stagnant, repressive and patriarchal after the decades of authoritarian rule that led to the disastrous defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. That defeat sounded the death knell of Arab nationalism and the resurgence of political Islam, which projected itself as the alternative to the more secular ideologies that had dominated the Arab republics since the Second World War. If Arab decline was the problem, then “Islam is the solution,” the Islamists said—and they believed it.

At their core, both political currents—Arab nationalism and Islamism—are driven by atavistic impulses and a regressive outlook on life that is grounded in a mostly mythologized past. Many Islamists, including Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood (the wellspring of such groups)—whether they say it explicitly or hint at it—are still on a ceaseless quest to resurrect the old Ottoman Caliphate. Still more radical types—the Salafists—yearn for a return to the puritanical days of Prophet Muhammad and his companions. For most Islamists, democracy means only majoritarian rule, and the rule of sharia law, which codifies gender inequality and discrimination against non-Muslims.

And let’s face the grim truth: There is no evidence whatever that Islam in its various political forms is compatible with modern democracy. From Afghanistan under the Taliban to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and from Iran to Sudan, there is no Islamist entity that can be said to be democratic, just or a practitioner of good governance. The short rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt under the presidency of Mohamed Morsi was no exception. The Brotherhood tried to monopolize power, hound and intimidate the opposition and was driving the country toward a dangerous impasse before a violent military coup ended the brief experimentation with Islamist rule.

Like the Islamists, the Arab nationalists—particularly the Baathists—were also fixated on a “renaissance” of past Arab greatness, which had once flourished in the famed cities of Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo and Córdoba in Al-Andalus, now Spain. These nationalists believed that Arab language and culture (and to a lesser extent Islam) were enough

to unite disparate entities with different levels of social, political and cultural development. They were in denial that they lived in a far more diverse world. Those minorities that resisted the primacy of Arab identity were discriminated against, denied citizenship and basic rights, and in the case of the Kurds in Iraq were subjected to massive repression and killings of genocidal proportion. Under the guise of Arab nationalism the modern Arab despot (Saddam, Qaddafi, the Assads) emerged. But these men lived in splendid solitude, detached from their own people. The repression and intimidation of the societies they ruled over were painfully summarized by the gifted Syrian poet Muhammad al-Maghout: “I enter the bathroom with my identity papers in my hand.”

The dictators, always unpopular, opened the door to the Islamists’ rise when they proved just as incompetent as the monarchs they had replaced. That, again, came in 1967 after the crushing defeat of Nasserite Egypt and Baathist Syria at the hands of Israel. From that moment on Arab politics began to be animated by various Islamist parties and movements. The dictators, in their desperation to hold onto their waning power, only became more brutal in the 1980s and ‘90s. But the Islamists kept coming back in new and various shapes and stripes, only to be crushed again ever more ferociously.

The year 1979 was a watershed moment for political Islam. An Islamic revolution exploded in Iran, provoked in part by decades of Western support for the corrupt shah. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and a group of bloody zealots occupied the Grand Mosque in Mecca for two weeks. After these cataclysmic events political Islam became more atavistic in its Sunni manifestations and more belligerent in its Shia manifestations. Saudi Arabia, in order to reassert its fundamentalist “wahhabi” ethos, became stricter in its application of Islamic law, and increased its financial aid to ultraconservative Islamists and their schools throughout the world. The Islamization of the war in Afghanistan against Soviet occupation—a project organized and financed by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan—triggered a tectonic change in the political map of South Asia and the Middle East. The Afghan war was the baptism of fire for terrorist outfits like the Egyptian Islamic Group and al Qaeda, the

progenitors of the Islamic State.

This decades-long struggle for legitimacy between the dictators and the Islamists meant that when the Arab Spring uprisings began in early 2011, there were no other political alternatives. You had only the Scylla of the national security state and the Charybdis of political Islam. The secularists and liberals, while playing the leading role in the early phase of the Egyptian uprisings, were marginalized later by the Islamists who, because of their political experience as an old movement, won parliamentary and presidential elections. In a region shorn of real political life it was difficult for the admittedly divided and not very experienced liberals and secularists to form viable political parties.

So no one should be surprised that the Islamists and the remnants of the national security state have dominated Egypt since the fall of Hosni Mubarak. In the end, the uprising removed the tip of the political pyramid—Mubarak and some of his cronies—but the rest of the repressive structure, what the Egyptians refer to as the “deep state” (the army, security apparatus, the judiciary, state media and vested economic interests), remained intact. After the failed experiment of Muslim Brotherhood rule, a bloody coup in 2013 completed the circle and brought Egypt back under the control of a retired general.

In today’s Iraq, too, the failure of a would-be authoritarian—recently departed Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki—has contributed to the rise of the Islamists. The Islamic State is exploiting the alienated Arab Sunni minority, which feels marginalized and disenfranchised in an Iraq dominated by the Shia for the first time in its history and significantly influenced by Iran.

Almost every Muslim era, including the enlightened ones, has been challenged by groups that espouse a virulent brand of austere, puritanical and absolutist Islam. They have different names, but are driven by the same fanatical, atavistic impulses. The great city of Córdoba, one of the most advanced cities in Medieval Europe, was sacked and plundered by such a group (Al Mourabitoun) in 1013,

destroying its magnificent palaces and its famed library. In the 1920s the Ikhwan Movement in Arabia (no relation to the Egyptian movement) was so fanatical that the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, who collaborated with them initially, had to crush them later on. In contemporary times, these groups include the Taliban, al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Yes, it is misleading to lump—as some do—all Islamist groups together, even though all are conservative in varying degrees. As terrorist organizations, al Qaeda and Islamic State are different from the Muslim Brotherhood, a conservative movement that renounced violence years ago, although it did dabble with violence in the past.

Nonetheless, most of these groups do belong to the same family tree—and all of them stem from the Arabs' civilizational ills. The Islamic State, like al Qaeda, is the tumorous creation of an ailing Arab body politic. Its roots run deep in the badlands of a tormented Arab world that seems to be slouching aimlessly through the darkness. It took the Arabs decades and generations to reach this nadir. It will take us a long time to recover—it certainly won't happen in my lifetime. My generation of Arabs was told by both the Arab nationalists and the Islamists that we should man the proverbial ramparts to defend the "Arab World" against the numerous barbarians (imperialists, Zionists, Soviets) massing at the gates. Little did we know that the barbarians were already inside the gates, that they spoke our language and were already very well entrenched in the city.

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