

There Are No Easy Answers for US Policy in Syria
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It is distressing to see Syrian people-ordinary civilians-hunkering down in bunkers without sufficient food, water, or medicine. Syrians look at us on screen and wonder why nobody is helping them. Why are we not?

Arab dictatorships have similarities. Syria has been run by a father and son, the Assads, for the past half century. Tunisia, Iraq, Libya, and Egypt were others. They all began as secular dictatorships; Islam did not have the pride of place it enjoyed in the past.

Modernization. Modernization is a dangerous process. Being modern can mean fairly western-appearing cities, civil servants, judges who are western educated (not Muslim clerics), and sometimes modern-seeming media. Being modern can also mean using the latest means of technology to keep tight control over your population and very modern means of torture and intimidation. It also means having an army strong enough to control their own population, which has been deliberately disarmed. These are modern police states.

Westernization. What they do not have are western democracy's separation of powers in governing; independent courts and press; literacy of over 50 percent, including women; and protection for minorities. If these institutions are not built in to the system, voting will be something that happens perhaps once, before the next dictatorial faction is \223elected\224 to become the next oppressive government.

Taking on the Establishment. Peter the Great, Tsar of Russia in the 17th century, was the first Monarch-dictator who forced his backwater country to begin the process of catching up with the rest of Europe. He did it bloodily; he crushed the old feudal nobility and sent their sons to school in Europe; he smashed the traditional Russian Orthodox clerics, cut off their beards, and created a modernized version of Russian Orthodoxy; he created a modern army loyal to him, not to their feudal overlords. It was the only way to do it. Without him, Russia would look more like the Muslim world than the Western world today.

All the Muslim world dictators that I named above faced the same problems: taking power from the Muslim establishment by force. They improved literacy in urban areas, liberated urban women, not to standards that we have in the west, but decidedly better than before. And to defang the feudal elites, the dictators placed formerly persecuted minorities in positions of power in the government. The Shah of Iran, in particular, knew that he would get far more loyalty and diligence from Armenian Christians, Assyrian Christians, Baha'is, and Jews, than from the traditional elites.

Abuse of Power. However, these dictators abused their power, well before permanently reforming their cultures. Revolutions not only undo modernization, but make westernization impossible. The suppressed factions regain power and exact vengeance. Iran and now Turkey (non-Arab states) have shown that Islam can have a resurgence and can do enormous damage to both modernization and westernization. We are seeing this now in the Arab world, where the first decent elections are putting medieval Islamist parties in parliament.

There is a probability that Syria will face this fate too. The Assad regime, like Iraq's Saddam Hussein, belongs to a sect that is a minority ruling over the other sect (or sects). In Iraq, the Shiite majority is getting revenge over their former ruling Sunnis; ethnic cleansing is going on. In Syria, the Assads belong to a very secretive Shiite sect, the Alawites, ruling over the Sunni majority. It doesn't matter that Saddam Hussein and Bashir Assad were secular, not religious. What matters is that their clans have ruled over and suppressed the majority. If the Syrian revolution succeeds, there will be a genocide of Alawites, followed by Christians and Druze. Islamists have no patience for minorities.

We should learn from the Arab Spring in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, that small groups of western educated and very appealing revolutionaries make us want to help them. However, we have to remember that they are a small minority, and that when the smoke clears, factions that we will not like will take power. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

675 words

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