

Does Removing a Dictator Provide Freedom?
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Syria's descent into anarchy affects the neighborhood. During its fifty years under a one-family dictatorship, it was becoming a mostly secular, modernizing state. Syria's neighbors detested them, but there were enough agreements in place to live in relative peace.

Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, with roots in the Stone Age. Syria as a country or province has a history that goes back to 64 BC, Roman times. It was Christianized under Byzantine Roman rule and then Christianity was replaced by Islam when Muslims conquered it in 661 AD. It was an important trade center with Aleppo and Damascus at the end of the Silk Road with Persia and China. It was also, briefly, a center of Islamic learning.

During the Crusades period, the European nobles recognized that Syria was far more advanced than the Europe just coming out of the Dark Ages. For a brief period, Syria and the Holy Land were ruled over by European Crusader knights, but by the 13th century, that rule ended, and Syria's (and the rest of the Muslim world's) decline began. These lands knew only two kinds of rule: either an absolute monarch or multiple warlords.

Europe, meanwhile, began its inevitable rise through the rebirth of ancient learning (Renaissance); a religious revolution aided by literacy; a scientific revolution and printing press; and a political revolution, which has ultimately provided participatory governance and is today's global standard. None of these institutions have ever had a foothold in Islam, to this day.

But there is the problem of Syria: we naively believe that when a dictator is removed, democracy will rush in. We thought this would be so in Iraq, fresh from toppling Saddam Hossein, but instead, a vicious civil war still goes on. All that stands between minorities and persecution are powerful dictators. The cries for freedom in the Middle East never mean freedom for other religions or sects, nor for women, and certainly not for secular modernists.

In a brilliant article by Robert D. Kaplan, \342\200\234Anarchy and Hegemony,\342\200\235 Kaplan notes that no matter how we love equality (of races, ethnic groups, and sexual orientations), equality does not work in running a country. Without a power at the top that is accepted by the people as its legitimate source of law and order, there is chaos and anarchy, exactly what we are seeing in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan today.

Kaplan notes that domination of one sort or another, tyrannical or not, has a better chance of preventing sectarian massacres than a system in which no one is really in charge. Thomas Hobbes, the 17th century English philosopher, said that only where it is possible to punish the wicked can right and wrong have any practical meaning. Almost every empire in history was more just and prosperous than when they collapsed. Stability is not the natural order of things, unfortunately; it requires acceptance of power at the top to keep the lid on chaos. "Yes," Kaplan says, \342\200\234all empires end badly, but only after they have provided decades and centuries of relative peace.\342\200\235

The United States is the hegemon (recognized top dog) in the world today, but unlike the British Empire in the 19th century, we cannot just do what we like. However, we should not be quick to let the rest of the world go to the devil. The last time we did that, we opened the door for Hitler and Tojo. And had we not fought the monstrous Soviet Union, they would have been the world's hegemon, and that is not a happy thought. Ask anybody who lived under their rule.

One responsibility of the hegemon like us is not to go charging into a mess like Syria without plenty of thought. There are solutions out there that will require both a big stick and good diplomacy. If the dictator goes, the army must take charge, guaranteeing the safety of all minorities. We are the hegemon that can make this happen. Rule of law, not \342\200\234equality,\342\200\235 will save Syria from anarchy.

676 words

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