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Freedom Interrupted

JULY 19, 2012. THE line at passport control at Istanbul's Atatürk International Airport was long, way too long. Atatürk, or IST, as frequent visitors have come to know it, was once a "gloriously modern, efficient airport for a country with big ambitions. It had reached well beyond its capacity and become a frustrating slog over the past decade, though."[1] During that time Turkish Airlines had become a virtual arm of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, adding service wherever the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) wanted to flex its muscles or open a market, but especially throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and East Africa. The expansion pushed the arrivals and departure halls to the breaking points, but the Turkish leadership liked the idea of transforming IST into a global crossroads like the airports in London, Frankfurt, Dubai, New York, and Singapore, so the people kept coming. As difficult as it had become to navigate the sea of humanity splayed out across long hallways, eateries, and departure lounges to get to or from a flight, the airport was actually one of those places where the ethnic, religious, and national differences among travelers faded away in common pursuit of Johnnie Walker Black, Toblerone chocolate, Mavi Jeans, Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses, and Turkish delight.

The hustle and bustle of Istanbul's airport no doubt pleased the leaders of the AKP who not only saw it as an economic engine but as an expression of their worldview. Since it emerged from a split within Turkey's Islamist movement in the summer of 2001, the party

had portrayed itself as open to the world, business friendly, Europe-ready, and a leader in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The Islamist old guard had also spoken fancifully about the latter goal, but in the AKP's decade-long rule it had delivered and made Ankara a player in the Middle East in ways Turkish elites had previously shunned in favor of a West-oriented approach to the world. In this newly discovered prestige, the AKP connected the Ottoman era, Turkey's present, and its future. Almost a century after the dissolution of the Ottoman sultanate in 1922, a newly confident Turkish leadership, riding high on economic and political success at home, sought to position itself as a moral force, economic driver, and political power in the Muslim, but particularly Arab, world. There was no better reflection of this than then foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's declarations to the Grand National Assembly in April 2012:

> A new Middle East is emerging ... We will continue to be the master, the leader and the servant of this new Middle East. In the new Middle East the aspirations of the people and justice will rule; not tyranny, oppression and dictatorships. And we will be a strong defender of this voice. And a new zone of peace, stability and prosperity will emerge around Turkey.[2]

The Arab uprisings and the way Turkey was positioning itself to lead the region seemed to be the fulfillment of the AKP's ambitions that all the talk among Western elites about the so-called Turkish model only reinforced. In the afterglow of the uprisings, Istanbul became a place for Arabs to learn how to build new political systems. The city's hotels were jammed with conferences—the names of which all seemed to be "Turkey, the Arab World, and the Emerging Democratic Future"—in which the AKP imparted to Arab Middle Easterners the sources of Turkey's success. Wending their way through the rope line at passport control that morning was a polyglot group of Libyans, Tunisians, Egyptians, and Iraqis. A fair number of Saudis were also visiting on holiday.

About thirty minutes into the wait, an editor with *Foreign Policy* magazine emailed: "Do you want to write an article about Omar Suleiman?" It seemed a curious non sequitur. Suleiman had been very quiet since

the Presidential Election Commission disqualified him from running for Egypt's president in the spring. What was the sudden interest in an article on him? "Thanks, Dave. Just landed in IST. I'd love to do something on Omar some time, but I've got some other ideas I'd like to bat around with you." The reply came almost immediately: "Steven, he is dead." The news was a little staggering, another "holy moly" moment among many during the previous eighteen months. Hosni Mubarak's intelligence chief, consigliere, and (very briefly) vice president had been a gracious host on a number of occasions in Cairo the previous few years. He was the power center and the man who was (in his own words) "responsible for the stability of Egypt." On the evening before the January 25 uprising he insisted to a group of visitors, "Tunisia can never happen here." In the hubbub of the crowded airport, with three Libyans yammering away in the background eager to attend whatever meeting to which they had been invited, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali tucked away in Saudi Arabia, Syria burning, Yemen cracking, and a Muslim Brother set up at Egypt's Ittihadiyya Palace, Omar Suleiman's passing seemed the final and definitive marker of the end of one historical moment and the beginning of another.

Looking back, it all seems dream-like. Not just the Turkish swagger, the misbegotten Turkish model fixation, the giddy Libyans, but the entire era, if it can be called that. Egypt's Facebookers and bloggers, Mohammed al-Bouazizi, Khaled Said, Tahrir Square, brave Libyan fighters advancing on Tripoli, the Girl in the Blue Bra, and Gezi Park's girl in the red dress are of a recent but seemingly distant past—a gauzy sequence of determination, defiance, hope, and activism that has not been extinguished as much as eclipsed by political uncertainty, instability, and at times unspeakable violence.[3] In Egypt, the death of Khaled Said in 2010 at the hands of policemen embodied a police state run amok and contributed to the uprising six months later, but there have been thousands of Khaled Saids since. In Istanbul, Gezi Park seems a forlorn symbol of a country with no checks and balances on the ruling party's exercise of power. Tunisia's Avenue Habib Bourguiba, from which the Ministry of Interior keeps a watchful eye, represents a country on edge. And Benghazi, which the West saved from Muammar al-Qaddafi so that its activists and revolutionaries could build a better country, is thick with rival militias and violent extremists. New authoritarians

and techno-savvy terrorists have replaced techno-savvy revolutionaries as the makers of politics in the "new Middle East."

The blame for this state of affairs does and does not lie with the likes of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, countless Libyan militia leaders and extremists, and Beji Caid Essebsi. If any of them were better people, perhaps Egypt, Turkey, and Libya would be better places. Tunisia is better but is not a success, and its advantages are tenuous. It is a terrorist outrage or some other disaster away from a setback. There was also the reality that leaders around the Middle East harbored worldviews that were antithetical to what the uprisings and the Gezi Park protests stood for. At the same time, these figures cannot be held solely responsible for the nature of politics in their respective countries. They have certainly had help from feckless oppositions, bloodthirsty extremists, and indifferent world powers. In an important way, however, no one is directly responsible. The Middle East looks the way it does because the confluence of uprisings (not revolutions), institutions or lack of them, and the search for identity and authenticity have conspired to thwart the dreams of a democratic Middle East. Sisi, Erdoğan, Essebsi, and various Libyans have both driven politics and responded to the incentives and constraints the political environment has produced, calculating their interests accordingly.

This is a difficult reality to confront, especially for those who fervently believed in the power of street politics to change their world. Just when that moment so many had been waiting for arrived in Egypt and Libya, it disappeared. The long, hot summer of tear gas in Gezi Park had little impact on the prospects of the AKP, which remains firmly in control. Tunisians avoided the brink, but terrorism and economic collapse threaten to undo what gains—no matter how modest—Tunisia has achieved. That transitions to democracy in the Middle East have failed seems obvious. Yet a valiant optimism and brave defiance remain among those activists, democrats, and liberals who live in the region and perceive positive developments where there are few or none. Hounded, jailed, killed, or on the run, their message to the world is "Don't give up on us; the revolution is not over." They still are not afraid. Much has been written about how the uprisings broke the ability of leaders to instill the fear in their populations that is central to the durability of authoritarian rule. This new courage is purportedly matched with a

newfound willingness to question authority figures and the principles they espouse. This is a nice story, but it is largely ahistoric. It is true that the toppling of dictators and the region-wide nature of the unrest was unprecedented, but the uprisings themselves were not a new phenomenon in the region. The Middle East has known fear but also periodic revolts. Arabs have always found ways to critique their leaders and the political systems they oversee, whether through politics, art, satire, soccer, journalism, blogging, or some other form of protest. The trope that Arabs were docile until Tunisia's uprisings was just that, a trope.

What, then, will the Middle East look like? This is the question now being asked over muffins, bagels, and weak coffee in the conference rooms of Beltway consultancies across Northern Virginia. It is also no different from the question intelligence analysts and regional experts tangled with in mid-December 2010, just days before the Middle East that everyone had come to know seemed to come to an end. It is unclear why with the humbling hindsight of time anyone would hazard to answer this question. Predictions of stability were upended with the uprisings, which gave way to a moment of enthusiasm that rendered the Middle East's spring of 2011 to be France's 1789, Europe's 1848, or Eastern Europe's 1989. None of these analogies offered any useful insight into what was or would happen in the region. Even after the enthusiasm began to wane, when would-be reformers acted like the authoritarians they were and the body count began to rise, few imagined that countries would fail and that the dominant story of the region would be extremism rather than democracy. This did not mean that democracy would not or could never happen. Rather, the romantic and enthusiastic zeitgeist of 2011 and 2012 had shifted to a darker, more pessimistic view of what would unfold in the Middle East. That was the easy call to make with ugly authoritarian politics in Egypt and Turkey, and Libya's continued descent into chaos with multiple political and military forces vying for control. Then there was Tunisia, where people hoped all the goodwill from abroad would translate into economic opportunity, the government could break out of its immobility, the homegrown extremist problem would be kept at bay, and the armed forces would succeed in keeping out instability on the country's

borders. Further afield, blood continued to flow in copious quantities in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

Even as there are those who remained committed to the idea that the violence, uncertainty, and malaise of the politically murky present would give way to a new dawn, there are three critical factors that challenge this faith: the non-revolutionary nature of the uprisings, the way leaders have leveraged institutions and their stickiness, and the search for identity among many in the region. The combination has undermined the dream of just and democratic political systems, and instead unleashed instability and violence.

THAT VISION THING

Egypt's July 3, 2013, coup d'état was confounding. To the great acclaim of Egyptians just a few years earlier, the military helped oust Hosni Mubarak. Egyptians then voted for Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary candidates in large numbers. They also voted—thirteen million of them—for the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi to be Egypt's first post-Mubarak president. They then turned out in astonishingly large numbers to oppose Morsi a year later, ushering in the military's intervention, which was welcomed in so many Egyptian quarters as something that can only be described as akin to the grace of God. In the course of thirty months, the officers had gone from saviors to counterrevolutionaries to saviors again. The esteem with which Egyptians held the officer corps was best explained by the previous six decades of hopes and disappointments as well as the polarization and near chaos that marked Egypt under Morsi and the Brotherhood. Since the 1952 coup that ousted King Farouk and established Egypt as an Arab republic, the armed forces have been Egypt's state builder, liberator, and redeemer. Almost exactly six decades later, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and his fellow officers held out the same hopes for the Egyptians. In their self-proclaimed reset of the country's democratic transition, the officer corps promised to bring stability, prosperity, and dignity to Egypt. Whether conscious or not, Sisi's implicit and explicit references to the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser when there was a modicum of economic opportunity and national powers were telling. Egypt's past greatness was central to its future accomplishments under a

new great man in uniform. One could understand why Egyptians were willing to give themselves over to Sisi and the armed forces, but his vision for Egypt was a burden because neither the past nor the future were what Egyptians imagined them to be.

As the Sisi era has unfolded, he found that the commitments he made to Egyptians upon coming to power were extraordinarily difficult to keep. A gap quickly emerged between what Sisi told people about their daily lives and the way people were actually experiencing life. The Egyptian leadership sought to compensate for this difference with a propaganda campaign that could only be described as "Sisi-mania," which went well beyond the billboards and posters of the "great man" that are de rigueur in so many parts of the Middle East to include Sisi sandwiches, Sisi candy, Sisi pajamas, Sisi lingerie, Sisi cologne, Sisi T-shirts, and Sisi ringtones. All of this went with odes to the great man in the government-affiliated press and video paeans to Sisi and the armed forces.[4] Yet had the legitimacy of the coup and Sisi's rule never been questioned, this garish and, in a way, humiliating display of obsequiousness and fealty, much of which the government itself manufactured, would not have been needed.

The Egyptians also employed various degrees and forms of coercion. The primary targets of state violence were the Muslim Brotherhood and extremists, but they were not the only ones. The significant discrepancies between Sisi's public pronouncements about stability, economic opportunity, and governance and the country's bleak reality only reinforced Egypt's authoritarianism. Students, journalists, academics, and activists of all stripes were remanded to prison for highlighting or raising their voices in protest over the state's violence, corruption, and incompetence that wasted lives and resources. The profoundly repressive state of Egypt's politics exceeded anything under Mubarak, but the underlying patterns of politics and the means of establishing control were largely the same.

At a superficial level Turkey provides a contrast to Egypt's pathological authoritarianism. The Justice and Development Party's (AKP) vision for Turkey's future was an integral component of its long successful run. The party's emphasis on Muslim values, prosperity, and national power resonated deeply with its core constituency and beyond. It was liberating for Turks to celebrate themselves and their own historical

legacies in the way that the AKP deemphasized Kemalism and its obsession with Western culture in favor of a highly specific and favorable interpretation of the Ottoman era. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reversed the long-running narrative concerning Turkey's desire to be part of the West, essentially telling his fellow citizens that if the Europeans wanted to leave Turks knocking on the gates of Vienna, then it was their loss. It also helped Erdoğan that Turkey's other political parties proved incapable of crafting their own vision for the future, but this would have given the AKP less of an advantage had the party not also delivered. That Turks felt wealthier, perceived the growing global and regional importance of Ankara, and were permitted to explore their Muslim identities reinforced the AKP's worldview and contributed to its success. What Erdoğan told Turks—at least the pluralities who voted for his party—about themselves, their country, and their society was consistent with the way they experienced it.

Yet all was not well in Turkey. The Turkish media environment reflected the fact that the AKP's vision, despite the party's consistent electoral success, was not hegemonic. Had it been, there would have been no purpose for the virtual ministry of information that the party forged out of various newspapers and television networks that reliably reproduced Erdoğan's version of events and crowded out the remaining few outlets with alternate editorial lines. The AKP had come tantalizingly close to winning 50 percent of the popular vote in 2007, 2011, and the November 2015 redo of the general election, but it seemed unable to push beyond that threshold. Consequently, Turkey's leaders governed the almost-half of the country that voted for them and intimidated the rest. Erdoğan threatened the big business community unless they were willing to support him, hammered away at the idea that those who opposed him were either terrorists or not authentic Turks, packed the courts, purged the bureaucracy, sued his critics, and after the failed July 2016 coup d'état, widened his war on the Gülenists. It was a cruel irony that Erdoğan deployed tactics against his opponents that have roots in the political system the AKP vowed to change when it came to office in 2002.

Tunisia had not experienced the kind of resurgent authoritarianism that had become a fact of life in Egypt and Turkey, but its leaders were caught within the pressures of secularism, Islamism, and democracy

that had an impact on the quality of Tunisian politics. A new constitution and successful elections in 2014 were bright spots, but those who questioned provisions of the anti-terrorism law, the draft financial reconciliation bill, or the continuing lack of opportunity confronted the heavy hand of the Ministry of Interior just as they had during Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's rule. The flare-up of protests on the fifth anniversary of Ben Ali's departure in Tunisia's south-central region, including Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine in the west, and Bizerte on the north coast, and the security forces' response to these demonstrations underscored how little things had actually changed. A significant part of Tunisia's problem was the inability of the country's leaders to offer a powerful and widely shared vision for the country's future, which accentuated the underlying distrust among the country's political actors and their supporters.

In 2016, as Tunisia reeled from a series of terrorist attacks, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, the leader of the Islamist Ennahda Movement, declared that the answer to the extremist phenomenon was more democracy.[5] The underlying logic of his argument that a just and open political system was an elixir for extremism was straightforward, though flawed. Tunisians, who made up a surprisingly large contingent of the self-declared Islamic State's cadres, were not fighting because Tunisia needed more democracy. For the ideologically committed, both democracy and authoritarianism were fatally flawed given that both systems place human laws above God. Ghannouchi's argument worked better at a level of abstraction, however. The failures of the Middle East's uprisings to produce decent political systems and the concomitant bloodshed accentuated conflicts over identity that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his followers purported to have resolved within the territory of the Islamic State. Democracy was the solution, according to Ghannouchi, because representative political systems would offer dignity, citizenship, and a sense of belonging that would blunt the appeal of the Islamic State and other groups. This would certainly be a positive development, but given the circumstances under which Ghannouchi made his statement, it seemed like the plea of a man whose worldview remained powerful but its realization frustratingly out of reach.

Tunisians had voted for his Ennahda in large numbers but gave an even larger percentage of votes to Beji Caid Essebsi's decidedly secular

Nidaa Tounes. It mattered a lot for Tunisian politics that the party imploded in late 2015 and early 2016, but its previous dynamism revealed a weakness at the core of Ghannouchi's vision: for an apparently large number of Tunisians, the linkage between Ennahda's version of Islamism and democracy did not make sense. As a result, in May 2016, Ghannouchi announced that the Ennahda Movement was no longer interested in advancing an Islamist agenda. The failure to articulate a vision was not Ghannouchi's alone, however. The European-leftist-inspired secularism of a variety of other parties and the main labor union also seemed alien to a significant number of Tunisians. Perhaps this was healthy, creating an overall balance of political forces that prevented any single group from imposing its will on others. It was also a prescription for political deadlock and policy drift, which plagued admirably broad-based but weak governments as the patience of Tunisians wore thin and cynicism crept in.

No one in Libya could offer a vision of either a centralized system of government or federalism, in which sovereignty is shared by a central government and regions, that would be acceptable to all parties concerned. The international community merely hoped for some semblance of a government in the 2015 national unity agreement. That there was a political process in Libya was a testament to the fact that some people supported unity and disliked the extremism that had become embedded in the country's landscape, but the politics had proven over and over again quite different from Libya's fragmented reality. Perhaps it would take the forty years that Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi had warned about before an agreement could be reached among warring factions, or perhaps some group would emerge powerful enough to disarm the others. This was, after all, how the Taliban emerged in Afghanistan in the 1990s.

AUTHORITARIAN INSTABILITY

This image of the Middle East feels both old and new, but in what ways? Without a doubt Libya's fragmentation represents an important change, but it is the result of a condition that has existed in Libyan politics for some time in which the informal affiliations of tribe and region outweigh all others—a dynamic that Muammar al-Qaddafi's fall accentuated. Turkey seems just as far, if not farther, from democracy than it

did two decades ago.[6] Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is not Hosni Mubarak, but the way he has sought to establish control and the nature of politics in Egypt are both reminiscent of what is commonly referred to as the old order and, in ways, exceed the coercion that was common to the previous era. Tunisia might emerge with a more just and democratic political system, but, overall, authoritarianism will likely be a persistent feature of the region more broadly.

The Middle East will also be chronically and violently unstable. This seems to be a new factor in the region, but only the scale of this instability is novel. As proponents of democracy promotion consistently argued in the 2000s, the authoritarian stability of the region was actually no stability at all. It was merely a false sense that leaders had the ability to deflect and undermine demands from below for change. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Turkey have long been ideologically rich, politically contested, and occasionally quite violent. The first two factors are now manifest in spades and violence has sadly become a part of life for Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, and Turks. Thus, the defining features of the new era in the Middle East will be resurgent authoritarianism and sustained instability, but that should surprise no one.

For all of the analytic attention on change in the Middle East since late 2010, the underlying pathologies of politics in the Middle East remain remarkably similar to the world that existed then. The Arab uprisings and the Gezi Park protests were extraordinary moments to witness. In a variety of ways, they were deeply moving and transformative personally. After eighteen days in Tahrir Square, a passionate and dedicated member of the Muslim Brotherhood confided that he felt he had more in common with the Coptic Christians and liberal young women whom he encountered during the demonstrations than with his own organization's leadership. If only that sense of unity had lasted—but it was never actually meant to be. The awe and overwhelming sense of hope in Ashraf Swelam's question "What could be wrong?" and his own inspiring answer of "We are now free" was no match for the realities of the Middle East. What leaders left behind in their wake, the institutions available to new ones, and the still unsettled questions of identity conspired to thwart the dreams of so many. The dawn that first broke in Tunisia, promising a new era, proved to be a false one.

That activists, democrats, liberals, and would-be revolutionaries made mistakes is a given, but they were beaten almost from the start. Their collective failure was itself a product of the authoritarianism they resist. Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, and Turks seem to have now collectively awakened with a start to the realization that the future will likely be no better than when Mohammed al-Bouazizi struck the match.