



The Arab Spring proved to be a fleeting season of hope of the Middle East. Here, in February 2011, protesters put their lives on the line by sitting around tanks in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Flickr photo

From Failed States to a Failed Region: The Middle East in Crisis

Jeremy Kinsman

Why have Arab states failed? Within borders drawn by outsiders in their own imperial interests, most are institutionally weak, archaic, corrupt and inert, riven by sectarian hostilities. The epicenter of failure is Syria, from whose calamitous collapse refugees are piling into the European Union, already reeling from terrorist attacks by the murderous Islamic State. The ability of the international community to ease the crisis depends on whether the US and Russia can work together to force a cease-fire in Syria's civil war and decisive military action against ISIL. Staunching the disaster will also require regional players, notably Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey to temper their competitive pursuit of national advantages.

It is sad to remember that only a quarter-century ago, there was an abundance of reconciliation and shared purpose in the Middle East. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 united almost all Arabs—and Iran—behind an inclusive US-led international coalition of 34 countries, the largest military alliance since the Second World War, authorized by the UN Security Council with support from even the newly liberalizing Soviet Union.

Half a million US military personnel and almost as many from allies, including 4,500 from Canada (and 100,000 from Syria), defeated Iraq's million-man army, the world's fourth

largest, in only six weeks. On February 28, 1991, I sat with Foreign Affairs Minister State Joe Clark watching CNN's unprecedented images of the destruction of the huge Iraqi column withdrawing across the desert from Kuwait. Canadian CF-18s were among the attackers of the exposed and by-then helpless Iraqis. He called his counterpart, US Secretary of State James Baker, who said President Bush was breaking off the pursuit; carrying the fight to Baghdad had no support from the allies, nor from the UN.

Diplomacy succeeded war. We headed immediately to the region, joining an effort to convert the unprecedented cooperation into a building block for lasting peace for the Middle East, including tackling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a tacit promise made to Arab coalition allies.

First stop was Saudi Arabia—the main military staging platform, the principal financial backer of the war (paying \$36 billion of the \$60 billion cost), and the bedrock ally of the US.

Our host for dinner was my university classmate, Prince Saud al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia's long-serving pro-Western Foreign Minister, a champion of the Saudi-US strategic oil and security alliance.

A few other foreign ministers who had flown right in—notably Baker from the US and the dapper foreign minister of France, Roland Dumas, joined us. Operation Desert Storm's Commander, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, tossed aside my congratulations for the victory. "That was easy compared to surviving two months in Saudi Arabia with a few hundred thousand horny and thirsty American post-adolescent men and women without a single incident!"

By the end of 1991, the Madrid Peace Conference, co-chaired by the US and the USSR, produced a sketchy roadmap for reconciling Israel with its Arab neighbours and with Palestinians.

But the Oslo Peace process that followed would collapse. Israel proved unwilling to halt its expansionist policy of settlements, and Palestinians to abandon their historic claims. Confidence-building was routed by

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renewed violence from the intifada and from the narcissism of extremists. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was felled by a rabid settler's bullet.

Meanwhile, a Saudi fundamentalist rebel sworn to avenge Saudi Arabia's sin of admitting the US Army to the land that held custody of Islam's most holy shrines, declared *jihad* against America. On September 11, 2001, 16 of 19 terrorist hijackers of three American planes were Saudis.

The hubris and pain-driven US quest to avenge the attack on the twin towers and the Pentagon and punish enemies led in a perverted train of false and falsified logic to the invasion and botched occupation of Iraq. This catastrophic blunder accelerated the mindless blood war between Islamic sects of Sunni and Shia and Iraq's collapse as a country. Jihadists worse even than Osama bin Laden poured into the vacuum.

Western countries looked for security to other ossified and corrupt dictatorial regimes of the Middle East, king-ly and secular. Believing they were stable was a delusion that a harassed Tunisian vegetable vendor blew apart in 2010, setting off the Arab Spring that swiftly turfed out despots in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, and rattled the absolutists in power in Riyadh and other monarchies. Hundreds of thousands of protesters poured into the streets of Syria.

While the Arab Spring was a momentary euphoric experience for the region's isolated youth, and all those fed up with generations of humiliating unfairness from greedy and parasitic regimes, it was short-lived. Its reversal in sophisticated Egypt and provincial Libya demonstrated how much easier it is to topple a dictator than to enable a democratic replacement.

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The threat of mass atrocity in Libya mobilized the international community to intervene from the air. But, burned by the insane costs of the blunder in Iraq and the over-staked investment in unreformable Afghanistan, we ducked the responsibility to support a secure transition. Gangs of thugs financed from the Gulf made an easy prey of unprepared Libyan would-be democrats.

Meanwhile, spooked by the Arab Spring's winds of change, the increasingly repressive Saudis intervened in Bahrain to smother protest and save the minority Sunni regime of the Khalifa family from revolution.

In Syria, a relatively modern and educated society, multi-sectarian and tolerant, but ruled as a secular police state by the iron hand of minority Shia Alawites, the Arab Spring's contagion had propelled massive non-violent protests that initially destabilized the regime. Expecting President Bashar al-Assad to fall, the US State Department set up in Jordan and Turkey training workshops for dissidents meant to return as mayors and community organizers. But the Syrian opposition and exile community abroad couldn't agree on much more than getting rid of Assad.

And Assad wasn't going. We all fatefully underestimated his regime's determination to defend itself with brutal force. Sniper attacks on protests caused the opposition to arm itself in self-defence. As violence escalated, the non-violent

movement was hijacked by violent militants supported by Saudi Arabia and Turkey. They couldn't, however, out-violence the regime. The country plunged into an unwinnable civil war of chaos and destruction. Today, 400,000 civilian deaths later, with eleven million chased from their homes, many of whom are refugees outside Syria, few Syrians would not willingly go back to five years ago.

The chaos in Syria and Iraq spawned a new and more frightful enemy. The so-called Islamic State surpassed Al Qaeda by succeeding in conquering and occupying territory from which to pursue war against Iraq and Syria, propel terrorist attacks in Europe and elsewhere, and lure tens of thousands of aimless and alienated young Muslims to join their dystopic fantasy.

ISIL's defeat is an overwhelming imperative in the region and for the international community. But the clarity of the mission is obscured by the confusing and contradictory welter of conflicting interests of regional and outside players.

Sunni Saudi Arabia cares more about its rivalry with Shia Iran and about deposing Iran's Shia ally, Assad, than about ISIL's Sunni fundamentalists, many of whose militants have been radicalized by Saudi-supported Wahhabi mosques.

Turkey is more concerned with thwarting the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish thrust for a state of their own that would metastasize to Kurds in Turkey.

The US was caught between the political wish of seeing Assad removed and the increasingly mandatory military objective of defeating ISIL.

Defeating ISIL requires a Muslim ground force. ISIL's most potent foe is Assad's Syrian Army, but it was tied up in the stalemated Syrian civil war, enabling ISIL to make significant territorial gains. Washington began to see that a much worse scenario to Assad staying would be ISIL walking into Damascus.

But first, the US would need to suppress its instinct that Russia is always up to no good. Though Russia's intervention last autumn to provide close combat air support to Syrian ground troops changed the military para-

digm, permitting the Assad government to push ISIL back, the US was reluctant to cheer, insisting Russian planes were mainly bombing "moderate" anti-Assad forces supported by the US, though it is unclear there are many left and in any case, that would hardly account for the Syrian success against ISIL. In any event, the intensified conflict aggravated an already calamitous humanitarian situation, spewing yet more refugees towards a destabilized Europe, and making a cessation of hostilities in the Syrian civil war imperative.

Washington circles fulminate over Putin, whose motives are multiple. No doubt he wants to break the US habitual temptation to seek regime changes in other peoples' countries. He does want to project Russia again as a decisive world player in a region and country where the USSR had a lot of sway. His muscular profile is popular in Russia. It distracts Putin's subjects from the economic downturn that is caused in part by sanctions from a Ukraine adventure that is increasingly costly.

But it isn't all about positioning. After multiple terrorist attacks on Russian planes, trains, schools, theatres, and apartment buildings, Russia views jihadism as a mortal enemy. Thousands of Chechens have joined ISIL's ranks.

The case for a joint US and Russian effort to stop the civil war in Syria to permit an all-out assault against ISIL is irrefutable. Secretary of State John Kerry sees no alternative: "If it doesn't work.... Syria will be utterly destroyed." The US needs to acknowledge Assad would endure for some time in some form of shared transitional government. To keep its side of the unfolding sets of bargains, Russia needs to control Assad who, as Russian UN Ambassador Churkin put it, should "follow Russia's leadership in settling this crisis." Painstaking confidence building between Russia and the US will be needed in what will no doubt be a wobbly cessation of hostilities in the civil war.

Then, the hard-power work to break ISIL as a threat, in the Iraq-Syria theatre and in Libya, where 5,000 fighters hold 150 miles of Mediterranean

coastline, will fall to Muslim troops; Syrian, Iraqi, Kurdish, and possibly Jordanian and others—who need robust support such as Canadian ground training upgrades.

Additionally, through robust and intelligent soft power, the international community needs to smother the financing of ISIL and counter the extremists' radicalization of youth.

Who knows if, after a long and painful reconstruction, enabling refugees to come home, Iraq and Syria can survive as unitary states, or in another defeat for pluralism, break into ethnic and sectarian parts?

Will the region ever recover from its fissures and feuds? Saudi Arabia and Iran seem to be trending in opposite ways, the Saudis doubling down on repressing human rights and pursuing national interests in oil strategy, while in Iran, moderates committed to a more positive internationalism are working their way to greater influence on the country's direction. Ultimately, only dilution of the all-powerful monopolistic religious authorities in both countries can abate the antique and absurd hostility of Shia and Sunni Muslims that disables the region.

It's up to the people. They will not accept being condemned forever to authoritarian rule. Whether the old-line regimes and skeptical outside backers, such as Putin, like it or not, the Arab Spring was a sign of what's to come. Like the great revolution in Europe of 1848, it initially failed. But a generation later, Europeans evolved toward democracy. There is no reason to believe that Arab youth (60 per cent of populations are under 25), having fleetingly experienced agency, will settle for less. But it's for them to make their own history, not for outsiders.

They will determine if a new Middle East can still emerge from today's ashes, and join the world as a productive partner. **P**

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