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“The Present and Future of Middle Eastern Democratization”

To analyze the changing tides of the Middle East – known variously as “the Arab Spring” and “the dominoes of democratization” – one can look at the individual countries of the Middle East or one can take a broader view. Here I will look at the new Middle East still emerging at the moment by utilizing analysis and observation methods of the latter approach. The changes in the Middle East can be considered from two perspectives. The first is to view these changes in a Middle Eastern or Arab context, while the second is to regard them as the particular impulses of citizens demanding the human desires of freedom, the rule of law, and abundance without resorting to specificity. These are not the all-too-common clashes between Arabs and Israelis, nor religious quarrels between Christians and Arabs. Given the extreme unlikelihood that anti-American populations would rise up against anti-American regimes such as those in Syria and Libya, neither is this a development driven by anti-American sentiment.

A variety of dimensions can be discerned from the changes in the Middle East. They can be characterized as liberation from the long-lasting spell of pan-Arabism known as Nasserism dating back to the 1950s. At the same time, there have also been areas in which the military and the Muslim Brotherhood have reached rapprochement, essentially producing a quiet coup d'état. It could also be said to be the delayed arrival of the third wave of democratization generated in Latin America and Eastern Europe 20 to 30 years ago. Furthermore, a high unemployment rate among youth has drawn some of them to terrorist organizations offering them the means to live and financial incentives, but they are being pulled back into domestic politics by the push for democratization.

1) Templates for intervention and democratization movements

To the points of commonality in the changes seen in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere mentioned above – freedom, the rule of law and prosperity – could be added the keyword “intervention.” The first stage comprised intervention via soft power such as the foreign media coverage in Tunisia and Egypt prior to March, the second stage hard-power intervention by foreign countries such as the use of military force by NATO and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Libya and Bahrain in April and May respectively, and the third stage intervention in the name of reconciliation as seen in Syria and Yemen from April to

June.

The Middle East peace efforts announced by President Obama in May were of three types. The first was the grant of economic aid to Egypt and Tunisia, which were deemed faithful to the “American model” of Middle Eastern democratization. The second was criticism specifically directed at the governments of Iran and Syria for their growing oppression of their own citizens. The third was reproach of the Bahraini government’s response to demonstrations. Obama made no comment regarding Saudi Arabia, however, although it would seem in particular need of democratization given its close connection to the US. It is thus difficult to deduce one single reason for US and NATO intervention. They have still not intervened against Israel for its attacks on Gaza nor against Yemen, but they immediately intervened against Libya, and not for humanitarian reasons alone. Conditions in each of these countries differ, making it problematic to analyze these interventions using the methodology of international politics, so perhaps a country-by-country analysis from a comparative politics perspective is required.

2) Egypt

What was the protest movement in Egypt’s Tahrir Square? According to one newspaper commentary, a certain human rights organization has described it in terms of three important political phenomena. This first is that isolated and unaided Arab individuals joined together as a group to make themselves heard. The second is that citizens sought to give real substance to the sovereignty they possessed. The third is that expectations rose of “social contract” principles granting political and civil rights to citizens and of the development of an egalitarian society free of disparities. Naturally we must wait and see if these observations hold true. Nevertheless, this is the manner in which a peaceful Arab people overcame a “wall of fear.”

3) Syria

The situation in Syria is unlikely to follow the pattern in Egypt as the military and security forces of the Assad regime, dominated by Alawis that constitute a 12% minority in Syria, have maintained control of the majority Sunni population. Acceptance of democratization usually hastens the collapse of a minority dictatorship, and the “wall of fear” of revenge by the majority confronted the public authorities in this instance. It is in fact Israel that hopes the Assad regime will stay in power in Syria. Holding out the possibility of a conflict with Israel as a shield, Syria has maintained its dictatorship under an “entrenched regime.” The Muslim Brotherhood that supports the present democratization movement in Syria was at one time responsible for the massacre of 20,000-30,000 people, and Israel fears the Brotherhood. The Assad regime did at one point attempt to push ahead with

democratization in Syria, but this effort was opposed by supporters of the previous regime. Assad also sought to advance economic liberalization but, as in Egypt, the gap between rich and poor only widened.

4) Bahrain

Bahrain, too, was unfortunately characterized by a sectarian dispute in which the majority Shi'ite population opposed the minority Sunni regime. The regime has problematically encouraged immigration and political naturalization from Sunni countries such as Syria and Pakistan to reduce the relative percentage of Shi'ites within the population as a whole, and preferentially hired Sunnis into the military and the police; indeed, it is even said that the lower house electoral districts have been gerrymandered in a manner advantageous to Sunnis. In the election, however, the Shi'ite Al Wefaq became the dominant party. This would seem to have presented an opportunity for establishing a constitutional monarchy, but Al Wefaq went so far as to demand an end to the monarchy and radical reforms. In response to Al Wefaq's demands, Crown Prince Salman proposed several compromises: (1) recognizing the complete authority held by the members of the lower house of the National Assembly, 2) transitioning to a parliamentary cabinet system, 3) putting an end to gerrymandering, and 4) reconsidering political naturalization. The Crown Prince on the 13th cunningly demanded an immediate response from Al Wefaq and, having received none on the 14th, ordered the deployment of a GCC joint military force comprising Saudi military units and UAE police units and declared a state of emergency.

5) Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and other members of the GCC have adopted a variety of approaches. First, the GCC criticized the crackdown in Libya and intervened alongside NATO, earning the favor of NATO and the US and boosting the GCC's image as a supporter of the democratization movements. Second, it persuaded the US, whose Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain, to maintain security. Third, it granted several billion dollars to Bahrain and Oman to be distributed for the welfare of the people. Finally, the Arab press did not focus on the uprising as a Shi'ite-led movement. Calls for overthrowing the monarchy in Bahrain led to the GCC's intervention. Being all Sunni monarchies, the GCC member countries reached a consensus driven by concerns about a domino effect toppling monarchies. The failure to transform Bahrain into a constitutional monarchy was unfortunate in that it was unable to serve as a model for the other GCC Gulf monarchies, demonstrating that freedom and the rule of law will not be traded for regime stability. Finally, I would like to discuss Turkey and Iran, both countries neighboring the area in which the democratization movement has been the most intense.

6) Turkey

Turkey is hoping that Syria will learn from Turkey's democratization and security measures. Having also recently conducted elections, Turkey is strategically implementing an omnidirectional "New Ottoman" foreign policy. The country previously regarded as the greatest danger – Iran – is now considered a friendly country in Turkey's National Security Policy Document (the "Red Book"), and Turkey has sought to maintain friendly ties with and to aid Israel as well as to mediate disputes between countries. Given its 700km with Syria, Turkey is particularly concerned about refugee issues, and it is pressuring the Assad regime to undertake reforms even as it voices its support for Syria's leadership.

7) Iran

Iran had been supporting Syria's regime. For instance, Iran itself repressed citizens who rose up in protest against the outcome of the presidential election two years ago, providing Syria with approaches for repressing its own citizens. However, all of Iran's friends are caught up in democratization movements.

Will Syria, a stronghold of Arab nationalism and democratization, adopt the methods of Turkey or of Iran? Syria is a junction between East and West, a transit point for the Crusader armies, and it has elements of both East and West in terms of genetic biology as well. It is also a country representative of the Arabs who built the Ummayyad dynasty and a stronghold of the democratization movement. If the democratization movement is brought to a halt in Syria, there is a possibility that it will be stopped across the Arab world. Major changes in the Middle East could have an impact on Japan.