

The Grand Dilemma

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PERHAPS YOU ARE FACING the same moral dilemma as I am:

What to think about Syria?

What to think about Egypt?

LET'S TAKE Syria first.

When it started, the choice for me was clear. There was this evil dictator, whose family had mistreated their people for decades. It was a tyranny with fascist overtones. A small minority, based on a religious sect, oppressed the vast majority. The prisons were full of political dissidents.

At long last, the long-suffering people stood up. Could there be any doubt about the moral obligation to give them all possible support?

Yet here I am, more than two years later, and I am full of doubts. It's no longer a clear choice between black and white, but between different shades of grey, or, if that is possible, different shades of black.

A civil war is raging. The misery of the population is indescribable. The number of dead terrifying.

Who to support? I envy those who have a simple yardstick: the evilness of the Americans. If the US supports one side, that side must surely be wrong. Or the mirror image: if Russia supports one side, that side must be evil.

Great powers have their interests, and intervene accordingly. But the roots of the conflict lie deeper, the issues are more profound.

WHAT WILL happen, if the government forces lose the battle and the rebels win?

Since the rebels are divided into several mutually antagonistic political and military forces and unable to set up a unified command, not to speak of a unified political movement, it is highly improbable that they would be able to set up a unified, truly democratic new order.

There are several probabilities and possibilities, none of them very appealing.

The Syrian state may break apart, with each religious and national community carving out a mini-state of its own. The Sunnis. The Alawites. The Kurds. The Druze.

Experience shows that such partitions are almost always accompanied by wholesale expulsions and massacres, as each community tries to ensure its acquisition is ethnically "clean". India-Pakistan, Israel-Palestine, Bosnia, Kosovo, to mention only some outstanding examples.

Another possibility is some form of formal democracy, in which the extreme Sunni Islamists will win fair and honest elections, under international supervision, and then go on to set up an oppressive, religiously monolithic regime.

Such a regime would probably undo several of the few positive aspects of Baathist rule, such as (relative) equality of women.

If there is continued chaos and insecurity, either the remnants of the army, or the rebel forces, will be tempted to set up a kind of overt or covert military regime.

HOW DOES all this affect present choices? Both the Americans and the Russians seem to be wavering. Obviously, they don't know what to do.

The Americans cling to their magic word, democracy, written in bold letters, even if it is only a formal democracy, without any real democratic content. But they are mortally afraid of yet another country falling "democratically" into the hands of extreme anti-American Islamists.

The Russians face an even more severe dilemma. Baathist Syria has been their client for generations. Their navy has a base in Tartus. (To me, the very idea of a naval base has an odd, 19th century flavor.) But they must be very afraid of Islamic fanaticism infecting their nearby Muslim provinces.

And the Israelis? Our government and security people are even more perplexed. They bomb arsenals of weapons which may fall into the hands of Hezbollah. They prefer the devil they know to the many devils they don't know. On the whole they wish that Bashar Assad would remain, but fear to interfere too openly.

In the meantime, supporters of both sides are rushing to the scene from all corners of the Muslim world and beyond.

Summary: a kind of fatalism is hovering over the country, everybody is waiting to see what happens on the battlefield.

THE CASE of Egypt is even more perplexing.

Who is right? Who is wrong? Who deserves my moral support?

On the one side, a democratically elected president and his religious party, evicted from power by a military coup (*Putsch* in German-Swiss).

On the other side, the young, progressive, secular peo-

ple in the cities, who started the revolution and feel that it has been “stolen” from them.

On yet another side, the army, which had been more or less in power since the 1952 coup against fat King Farouk, and which is loath to lose its immense political and economic privileges.

Who are the true democrats? The elected Muslim Brothers, whose very character is undemocratic? The revolutionaries, who are happy to use a military coup to get the democracy they want? The army, who opened fire on the protesters?

Well, it depends on what one means by democracy.

In my childhood I was an eye-witness to the democratic ascent to power of the Nazi party, who openly proclaimed that they would abolish democracy after their election. Hitler was so obsessed with the idea of obtaining power by democratic means that his opponents in his own party called him in jest “Adolf Légalité”.

It is almost banal to state that democracy means a lot more than elections and the rule of the majority. It is based on a whole set of values—practical things like a sense of belonging together, civic equality, liberalism, tolerance, fair play, the ability of a minority to become the next majority, and much more.

In a way, democracy is a platonic ideal—no country in the world is a perfect democracy (certainly not my own). A democratic constitution may mean nothing—it was once said that the 1936 Soviet constitution enacted by Stalin was the most democratic in the world. For example, it assured the right of every republic of the Soviet Union to secede at will (but somehow nobody ever tried).

WHEN MUHAMMAD MORSI was democratically elected President of Egypt, I was glad. I rather liked the guy. I hoped that he would prove that a moderate, modern Islamism could become a democratic force. It seems that I was mistaken.

No religion—and certainly no monotheistic religion—can be truly democratic. It upholds one absolute truth and denies all others. In Western religion, this is tempered by the division of labor between God and Caesar, and in modern times by the reduction of Christianity to a mere polite cult.

American Evangelicals try to set the clock back.

In Semitic religions, there can be no division between religion and state. Both Judaism and Islam base the state on religious law (Halacha and Sharia respectively).

The secular majority in Israel has, up to now, succeeded in maintaining a reasonably functioning democracy (in Israel proper, certainly not in the occupied Palestinian territories, where the opposite of democracy prevails). Zionism was, at least partly, a religious reformation. But personal status laws in Israel are purely religious, and so are many other laws. Right-wing elements are now promoting a Judaization of the state.

In Islam, there has been no reformation. Pious Muslims and their parties want to base the law on the Sharia (in fact, Sharia means law). The example of Morsi may show that even a moderate Islamic leader cannot withstand the pressure to create a Sharia-based regime.

The revolutionaries seem to be more democratic, but far less effective. Democracy demands the formation of political parties which can come to power through elections. The young secular idealists in Egypt—and in almost all other countries—have been unable to do so. They waited for the army to provide democracy for them.

This is, of course, an oxymoron. The army, any army, is the very opposite of democracy. An army is by necessity an authoritarian and hierarchical organization. A soldier, from corporal to commander in chief, is trained to obey and to command. Hardly a good breeding ground for democratic virtues.

An army can obey a democratic government. But an army cannot run a government. Almost all military dictatorships have been grossly incompetent. After all, a military officer is an expert in one profession (killing people, a cynic would say). He is not an expert on anything else.

Contrary to Syria, Egypt has a strong sense of cohesiveness and unity, a loyalty to a common idea of Egypt forged over thousands of years. Until last week, when the army opened fire on Islamists. This may be a historic turning point. I hope not.

I hope that the shock of this event will return all Egyptians, except, of course, the loonies on all sides, to their senses. The example of Syria and Lebanon should make them shrink back from the abyss.

IN A hundred years—when some of us may not be around anymore – historians may consider these events as the birth pangs of a new Arab world, like the wars of religion in 17th century Europe or the American Civil War 150 years ago.

As the Arabs themselves would say: Inshallah! God willing!