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Fall of the Raj

Egyptians revolted against American rule as well as Mubarak's.

By Eric Margolis

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The Mideast house of cards so laboriously constructed by Washington over the past four decades threatens to collapse. One can't help but be reminded of the revolts across Eastern Europe in 1989 that began the fall of the Soviet Empire.

Now it may be the turn of America's Mideast empire, an empire constructed of Arab dictatorships to assure U.S. domination of oil and Israel's domination of the Levant. The popular uprisings against Western-backed dictatorships that erupted in Tunisia, spread to Egypt, and have been flaring in Yemen, Jordan, and Morocco, are the result of Washington's dedication to what it calls "stability" and "moderation."

Yet we should note that the current uprising against Western-sponsored military rule in the Mideast did not begin in Tunisia, but with a slow-motion, barely noticed process in Turkey, where the moderate democratic AK party of Prime Minister Recep Erdogan has driven the Turkish army back to its barracks and out of politics. Turkey's ousting of its mighty military, which had ruled the nation behind a flimsy façade of parliamentary puppets since the 1940s, electrified the Muslim world. Turkey broke its close links to Israel and championed the cause of Palestine.



Egypt’s military dictator, General-President Hosni Mubarak, who ruled with an iron fist since 1981, was fulsomely hailed in the West for the twin qualities of stability and moderation. His unloving people may have called him “pharaoh,” but to successive administrations in Washington, he was a ‘valued, democratic statesman.’ The rulers of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan and Yemen—not to mention the oil monarchs of the Arabian Peninsula—were also lauded as moderates, guardians of stability, even democrats.

Stability, in the American lexicon, means not allowing any opposition parties or individuals to trouble the status quo, be they political Islamists or secular democrats. Challenging the Mideast’s Pax Americana became a subversive act that was usually branded terrorism and linked to the shadowy Osama bin Laden and his almost non-existent movement, al-Qaeda. The mere mention by Mideast autocrats of the dreaded Q-word was sufficient to hush American concerns about egregious violations of human rights by their satraps or the crushing of all opposition. The al-Qaeda bogeyman was certain to produce hefty infusions of U.S. military aid.

I chose the title of my latest book about how the U.S. rules the Arab world *American Raj* to underline the remarkable similarity between the control methods used by imperial Britain in India and those employed by its successor empire, the United States. “Raj” means imperium through local rulers. And that’s just the structure built by the U.S. across the Mideast.

“Stability” has been enforced by brutal secret police using torture and extra-judicial executions. In Egypt, a favorite punishment for male protesters and candidates who dared run in rigged elections against Mubarak was anal rape. Across the region, behind the secret police stood U.S. and French-equipped Arab armies whose primary military mission was to suppress their own people and prevent revolution. Battalions of informers,

and dismissal from government jobs or housing and pension plans, were all common tools used to dissuade anti-regime activities. Press censorship was universal.

Such was the “stability” cultivated and financed by the U.S. and, in North Africa, by France. “Moderation,” in turn, means being obedient to Washington’s demands, acting against all reformers and revolutionaries, and making nice to Israel. Egypt was paid \$2 billion per annum—it was the second highest recipient of foreign aid after Israel—to abandon the Palestinian cause. Tens of millions of “black” payments went to Egyptian generals, politicians, officials, and media.

But the foundations of the Raj are now gravely threatened by the spontaneous popular uprisings in the long-suffering Arab world. Ironically, the Mideast is finally getting a potent dose of the democracy that neoconservatives used to claim they were promoting. In their vocabulary, democracy really meant obedient regimes that were quietly friendly to Israel and never allowed unruly elements to surface.

Such ersatz democracies always meant rigged elections. America willingly closed its eyes to—or even abetted—these fraudulent votes across the Mideast, including in U.S.-occupied Iraq and in Afghanistan. After the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, they actually used to run somewhat more “honest” rigged elections than the Americans who followed them into Kabul years later.

In fact, there have been only two free elections in the Arab world. The first, in 1991 in Algeria, resulted in a landslide for moderate Islamists. Paris and Washington quickly backed the Algerian army in crushing the vote and jailing its victors.

The second free election occurred in Palestine in 2006. Hamas decisively defeated the Palestinian Authority government of Mahmoud Abbas, which was funded and guided by the U.S. and Israel, as confirmed by recent document leaks. The U.S., failing to overthrow Hamas, locked it up in the Gaza open-air prison in collaboration with Mubarak’s Egypt.

It was clear that free votes across the Arab world (and in Pakistan) would unseat most U.S.-backed regimes and produce either rambunctious democracies or government by various forms of Islamists, ranging from the cautious moderates of the Egyptian Brotherhood and Turkey’s AK party to Sunni firebrands. That could bring higher oil prices and problems for Israel.

Most important, collapse of the Raj threatens to destroy one of the pillars of U.S. world power: *control* of oil. America does not need to import Mideast oil, but it is determined to continue controlling the Arab states that produce oil, which gives Washington huge leverage over Europe, India, China, and Japan.

The explosions that began in January in the Mideast confirmed that the entire region is a cauldron of anger and discontent. Little Tunisia, with only 10.8 million people, ignited the conflagration when the thievery and arrogance of its dictator of three decades,

General Ben Ali, became too much to bear for even the easy-going Tunisians. Interestingly, Ben Ali had heeded Washington's half-hearted calls for more democracy—of the U.S. approved kind—by winning his last rigged election only by a cliff-hanging 89 percent rather than his usual 95 percent or even 98 percent.

Neoconservatives and their supporters, as well as many in the foreign-policy establishment, are now trying to deflect attention from the embarrassing failure of their Mideast policies by claiming the twin causes of the uprisings were demographics and Islamic fundamentalism.

Demography indeed played an important role in Mideast unrest. Twelve years ago I warned about the “onrushing tidal wave of young people that would swamp all Mideast governments” and pointed out there were not enough schools, apartments, jobs, or even food and water for the coming human inundation.

Half the Arab world's people are under 30, and of course high unemployment in the stagnant economics of the Mideast is an explosive issue. So is pervasive corruption at all levels that was often encouraged by the U.S. doling out money to key groups in the establishment. Discontent has been stoked by the total lack of real justice in the Arab world or Pakistan—this is a principal reason for the popularity of Islamic parties and swift, effective, but often draconian Sharia law.

But the most important detonator of recent events was fury at being compelled to follow policies hated by the peoples of the Mideast. Arabs from Morocco to Iraq have been enraged and shamed by seeing their governments adopt friendly or at least non-confrontational policies toward Israel and abandoning or even oppressing the Palestinians, whose suffering is the prime force producing anti-Western anger in the Muslim world. Thanks to al-Jazeera TV and the Internet, the plight of the Palestinians is now viewed nightly by tens of millions across the Muslim world.

In particular, Mubarak's collusion with Israel and the U.S. in jailing Palestinians in Gaza and trying to starve them into submission infuriated Egyptians. He was widely branded a traitor to his people and to the Palestinians and an arch-collaborator with Israel. It was no coincidence that Mubarak holed up at Sharm el-Sheikh in Sinai, a short helicopter ride to Israel. Unlike the United States, Israel usually sticks by its friends and allies.

The scenario played out in Iran in the 1970s. Its ruler, Shah Reza Pahlavi, and the grasping entourage of courtiers and businessmen around him sneered at Islamic religion and culture, put on Western airs, and readily accepted the role as Washington's policeman of the Gulf. Mubarak and his predecessor, Anwar Sadat, also followed this pattern.

The Shah supported with Israel, sold it oil, and scorned pleas of the Palestinians for help. Israel and the U.S. trained the Shah's notoriously brutal secret police, Savak, just as they have been doing with the secret police and intelligence agencies of Egypt, Morocco, and

Jordan which are virtually branches of CIA, just as Eastern Europe's little KGB's were subsidiaries of Moscow Center.

In Iran, Washington put all its political eggs in one basket. When the Shah was overthrown by a popular uprising, decades of U.S. policy went down the drain. America's support of the Shah and his secret police, and CIA's overthrow of the democratic Mossadegh government, turned Iranians violently against the United States and engendered decades of hatred and poisoned relations between two nations that should be friends and natural allies.

Now the same process is occurring in Egypt and throughout the American Raj. Mideast regimes have kept bending over to placate American policy demands until one day, like plastic, they snap without warning. What's left after the inevitable explosions is seething anti-American bitterness.

Ignore all the platitudes over Egypt coming from official Washington. While calling for democracy in the Arab world, the U.S. has been the godfather of dictatorship and repression for the past five decades. It takes a strong stomach to watch members of the Obama administration like Hillary Clinton or Vice President Biden, who used to call Mubarak a "democrat" and laud his "moderate" leadership, suddenly begin ask for an "orderly transition to democracy."

Hypocrisy is by no means exclusive to Washington: after revolts erupted in Tunisia, France's newly-appointed bumbling foreign minister actually offered Tunis tough French riot police to put down pro-democracy demonstrations. Britain, France, Canada, and Italy all backed Mideast dictatorships without the slightest compunctions.

Israel and its neoconservative partisans are now in high gear warning that it's either the Mubarak police state—with or without him—or firebrand, Iranian-style mullahs. These neocon alarms are no more credible than their self-serving falsehoods about the supposed dangers of Saddam Hussein. Easy-going Sunni Egypt is nothing like Shia Iran. So far, politicized religion has played almost no role in the great Egyptian revolt. But if legitimate demands by Egyptians for democracy and an end to four decades of police-state repression are not met, the revolution may well turn extreme.

Mubarak said on Feb. 1 that he would not "run" for president in Egypt's next rigged election this fall. His day has clearly passed. But the U.S. national-security establishment and supporters of Israel are hoping that the iron-fisted police apparatus that kept Mubarak in power for three decades, and Sadat before that, will still keep its grip on Egypt behind some sort of pliant new leader. The U.S. has groomed the hated intelligence chief Omar Suleiman to replace the 82-year-old Mubarak. It is also likely the CIA has designated backup generals to be Egypt's next ruler if Suleiman stumbles.

But Egyptians want real freedom. The last Egyptian leader who was not a tool of Western interests was the widely beloved Gamal Abdel Nasser, who died or was assassinated in

1970. Nasser was Egypt's first truly Egyptian ruler since the days of the ancient pharaohs.

How else might the endgame play out? Younger officers in Egypt's 450,000-man armed forces could stage a coup—just as Nasser's Young Officers did—putting the country on a nationalist course and restoring Egypt as the military, political, economic, and cultural center of the Arab world. Under Mubarak, Egypt has been a colonial backwater.

But Egypt's independence is constrained by poverty and lack of land. The nation, whose arable land is only the size of Maryland, cannot feed its 84-85 million people and has become the world's largest wheat importer through a major U.S. food-aid program, authorized by Congress—a program that has been rife with egregious illegalities and kickbacks.

The new Arab Intifada presents the United States with a golden opportunity to junk five decades of counter-productive, contradictory Mideast policy that has led to 9/11 and anti-American hatred across the Muslim world. America should now practice what it preaches and support real democratic movements in the region, even if we do not always like their policies. Americans must stop turning Islam into a bogeyman employed to thwart a viable Palestinian peace and sustain Israel's expansionist ambitions.

Creating a viable Palestinian state lies at the heart of this transformative process. Our old imperial policies and neoconservative fantasies have failed. Fostering real peace in the Mideast would do all its people, including Israelis and Palestinians, an historic service. This is what the America of Jefferson, Madison, and Eisenhower would have done. Arabs have been waiting for 50 years for America to show them the way to real democracy, social justice, and economic growth. The moment has arrived.