

Inquiring Minds Topic for April 19, 2013

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The Arab Quarter Century

By [THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN](#) – *The New York Times* – April 9, 2013

I guess it's official now: The term "Arab Spring" has to be retired. There is nothing springlike going on. The broader, but still vaguely hopeful, "Arab Awakening" also no longer seems valid, given all that has been awakened. And so the strategist Anthony Cordesman is probably right when he argues: It's best we now speak of the "Arab Decade" or the "Arab Quarter Century" — a long period of intrastate and intraregional instability, in which a struggle for both the future of Islam and the future of the individual Arab nations blend together into a "clash within a civilization." The ending: TBD.

When the Arab Spring first emerged, the easy analogy was the fall of the Berlin Wall. It appears that the right analogy is a different central European event — the Thirty Years' War in the 17th century — an awful mix of religious and political conflict, which eventually produced a new state order.

Some will say: "I told you so. You never should have hoped for this Arab Spring." Nonsense. The corrupt autocracies that gave us the previous 50 years of "stability" were just slow-motion disasters. Read the U.N.'s 2002 Arab Human Development Report about what deficits of freedom, women's empowerment and knowledge did to Arab peoples over the last 50 years. Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Syria are not falling apart today because their leaders were toppled. Their leaders were toppled because for too many years they failed too many of their people. Half the women in Egypt still can't read. That's what the stability of the last 50 years bought.

Also, "we" did not unleash the Arab Spring, and "we" could not have stopped it. These uprisings began with fearless, authentic quests for dignity by Arab youths, seeking the tools and freedom to realize their full potential in a world where they could see how everyone else was living. But no sooner did they blow the lids off their societies, seeking governments grounded in real citizenship, than they found themselves competing with other aspirations set loose — aspirations to be more Islamist, more sectarian or to restore the status quo ante.

Still, two things surprise me. The first is how incompetent the Muslim Brotherhood has been. In Egypt, the Brotherhood has presided over an economic death spiral and a judiciary caught up in idiocies like investigating the comedian Bassem Youssef, Egypt's

Jon Stewart, for allegedly insulting President Mohamed Morsi. Every time the Brotherhood had a choice of acting in an inclusive way or seizing more power, it seized more power, depriving it now of the broad base needed to make necessary but painful economic reforms.

The second surprise? How weak the democratic opposition has been. The tragedy of the Arab center-left is a complicated story, notes Marc Lynch, a Middle East expert at George Washington University and the author of “The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East.” Many of the more secular, more pro-Western Egyptian political elites who could lead new center-left parties, he said, had been “co-opted by the old regime” for its own semiofficial parties and therefore “were widely discredited in the eyes of the public.” That left youngsters who had never organized a party, or a grab bag of expatriates, former regime officials, Nasserites and liberal Islamists, whose only shared idea was that the old regime must go.

Since taking power in Egypt, “the Brotherhood has presided over economic failure and political collapse,” said Lynch. “They have lost the center, they are feuding with the Salafists, and they are now down to their core 25 percent of support. There is no way they should win a fair election, which is why the opposition should be running in — not boycotting — the next parliamentary elections.” The old line that you have to wait on elections until a moderate civil society can be built is a proven failure. “You can’t teach someone to be a great basketball player by showing them videos,” he said. “They have to play — and the opposition will not become effective until they compete and lose and win again.”

The old sources of stability that held this region together are gone. No iron-fisted outside powers *want* to occupy these countries anymore, because all you win today is a bill. No iron-fisted dictators *can* control these countries anymore, because their people have lost their fear. The first elected governments — led by the Muslim Brotherhood — have the wrong ideas. More Islam is not the answer. More of the Arab Human Development Report is the answer. But the democratic opposition youths don’t yet have leaders to galvanize their people around that vision.

Given all this, America’s least bad option is to use its economic clout to insist on democratic constitutional rules, regular elections and political openness, and to do all it can to encourage moderate opposition leaders to run for office. We should support anyone who wants to implement the Arab Human Development Report and oppose anyone who doesn’t. That is the only way these societies can give birth to their only hope: a new generation of decent leaders who can ensure that this “Arab Quarter Century” ends better than it began.