

Bombing Syria, Isis, and How We Got Here

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, MAY 4 2017

In my earlier years, a friend of a friend of a friend of mine was from Syria. He and a few friends of his were regularly at professional and semi-professional parties that I attended. As someone who did several years of research in Israel during those years, of course, I had many Israeli friends as well. In those years, there was a policy that Israelis and Syrians do not speak to one another if they meet abroad. They do not share secrets. They do not share family stories. They do not share reflections upon one another's countries. They do not share more than the weather, by which time they should have been able to establish that they were, indeed, speaking to one another and needed to stop.

A friend of mine put on a party and invited me. Some friends of mine who worked in entry-level positions in the Ministry of Education in Israel were visiting. I brought them. Neither my friend nor I put together that we were bringing Syrian and Israeli friends to the same party. There were no explosions. There were not even cross words. They met politely, introduced themselves, and asked where the others were from. Each group chuckled – both genuinely charmed and nervous – upon finding out that they lived within those 136 miles that define the distance between Damascus and Jerusalem.

Each chuckled slightly, momentarily deciding whether they would speak further. One asked the other how it was to live in Jerusalem, saying, somewhat pointedly but with gentle humor, "I remember, we have very beautiful family pictures from Jerusalem." The other asked how it was to live in Damascus, asking, sincerely, "Do the Syrian people *really* love Assad, or is that just shows of support that are required of them?" I am paraphrasing, of course. These conversations happened in the 1990s not long after the Gulf War.

The two groups agreed, strongly nodding that, yes, indeed, Jerusalem was a very beautiful place. Some of them smiled and nodded at me, and my friend whose party it was, to assure us that they were on their best behavior. Everyone smiled and laughed at the awkwardness of the situation, and continued to drink their beer or wine or soda or tea, whatever the case happened to be. When asked, again, if the Syrian people really loved Assad, one friend made it clear that no answer could be made, by way of saying, "The Syrian people love their Father, Assad." The reach of that authoritarian regime stretched even to both large- and small town U.S.A. It was a danger to people's lives who thwarted it. Books like Bouthaina Shaaban's *Both Right and Left Handed* offer a glimpse into the very regular, normal, everyday details of living in Syria during the Assad regime. This was true as long as one did not cross certain political lines.

The United States encouraged peoples of the Middle East to rise up against authoritarianism during the Gulf War. We asked peoples of the Middle East to rise up against authoritarianism and to push for democracy during and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Reformists in Iran since the reformist elections of 1997 quietly persisted in social resistance after the election of hardliners in 2005, in part through new technologies such as the internet. In the mid-2000s, a series of demonstrations rocked the political establishment of Egypt, as noted in academic works on Cairo. Finally, when a man immolated himself in Tunisia to express the impossibility of continuing under conditions of authoritarianism and corruption in December of 2010, we supported that democratic movement. To my mind, we bungled Egypt's democratic movement in a fairly intentional and systematic way; what was a truly broad, democratic movement could have become a strong democracy. Millions of Egyptians who just want to live their lives in peace, practice their religion in peace, raise their children in peace, and to have the same *freedoms to choose* that we do

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have to wait yet a little bit longer. This, for the promises given by Western powers after World War I and San Remo – namely, if you build *our* type of (Napoleonic centralized) state, you will experience all of the benefits of modernity, including freedom! Not surprisingly, if you read James Scott, that type of state, without institutionalized channels of communication put in place to mediate *any* kind of relationship between state and society other than domination, led in all cases in the short run and most cases in the long run to authoritarianism. That is, all post-WWI Middle Eastern states that embraced the centralized Napoleonic state model – Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Iran, and, by the 1950s, Iraq — started as authoritarian regimes. Only Turkey became a democracy. Together, these states made up about 63% of the population of the Middle East and North Africa in 2001. This particular experience with a dominating secular authoritarianism is significant, population-wise, across the region. Monarchies in the Middle East do not fall in this category.

When the Syrian people rose up against Assad village by village, town by town, and city by city across the country, we stood mute. Newspaper and individual reports from the Middle East suggested that ISIS emerged and mobilized, initially, out of the outrage regarding millions of Syrians left to defend themselves against this Baathist (read that, neo-Stalinist) regime. This, after raising themselves to our rallying cry for democratization in the Middle East.

To say that some of our leaders are uncomfortable with democracy in the Middle East has become a truism. It is time that we took our heads out of the – sand, for lack of a better metaphor – and realize that in the 21st century we simply cannot get away with living in freedom and insisting that significant Other parts of the world not.

The Arab Spring came just under 100 years after the promises of San Remo and similar conferences, correspondences, and agreements with Europe. It takes a whole lot to incite people to rise against the (neo-Stalinist) type of leadership found in Syria. The people of Syria did it. That we in the U.S. now have to contend with ISIS, to my mind as a Middle East specialist, is the fault of a *deeply hypocritical, privileged, and spineless political leadership at the national level*.

Religion is not the problem in the world today, as secularists so like to have it. It is our privileged (secular) cousins on their civilizing missions, sitting in their houses on the tops of high hills, looking down at the rest of the world and saying that *they* are not yet ready to be free, or that *we* get to dominate *them* just a little bit longer.

There is a true ideological divide in the U.S. today. But it does not track with Republican/Democratic lines. Sadly, it tracks with something that is by now much more prosaic: true democrats versus neo-colonialists.

Not all military actions are equal. Not all military actions are colonialist. I find the relativism in claims that they are endlessly frustrating in the face of real Crimes Against Humanity brought by a regime against its own people. It is about time that we stood up to our own promises and back the Syrian people in their efforts for democratization *of their own*.

About the author:

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