

Great Decisions: Katonah

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George Roy

## **US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: 2012**

Idealists: Our policy should be governed by what is best for all the people in the region.

Realists: Our policy should only be governed by what is in the best interest of the U.S.

Obama: We will pursue humanitarian goals as long as they are consistent with the national and political interests of the US.

Jeffrey Goldberg in the Atlantic (6/11) "... it is true that the US retains fixed and vital interests across the M.E., interests that have already forced the U.S. to side with monarchs over the masses they rule."

Consequently, the people of the M.E. have a love –hate relationship with the US, based on their love for our ideals and their hate for our support of dictators.

What are the actual goals of the foreign policy of the US: oil, non–proliferation, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

### **Causes of the Arab Spring:**

There is a growing awareness across the region that things are not now as they could be. This awareness is fomented by the media and the web. The growing educational levels in the region have also made the young aware that the political, social, economic and religious conditions in the EU and the US are more advantageous.

Middle East governments resorted to education in order to keep the middle class youth from causing unrest. Because of improvements in infant survival the percentages of the youth in the ME are double that which you find in the EU and the US. But this education eventually led to more frustration because the authoritarian and stagnant society did not provide employment worthy of their status. Craig Brinton wrote that a frustrated middle class drives a society towards revolution.

Authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism constrain the flow of ideas and innovation so the general population is naive politically and economically. These forces conspire to inhibit social and economic growth.

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The Arab spring can only be understood within the context of Islam. Islam like all great religions manifests a large variety of beliefs and practices ranging from the highly rigorous fundamentalists (Taliban, Wahabi) to secular and cultural Muslims. Fundamentalists tend to believe in the literal truth of the Quran, the Hadith, the Sunna etc. Sharia law codifies these ideas in a legalistic formulation and when applied to society every aspect is governed by religious precepts. Like all ancient religions social norms are codified as God's word. In the case of Islam desert nomadic practices are related as God's teaching. There are other distinctive practices to Islam (the veil) which are later accretions.

### **Divisions of Islam: Sunni and Shia**

These divisions have their impact on the Arab spring and on the contemporary history of the region. These divisions are ancient having occurred after the death of the Prophet and are based on how the succession should be determined. Violence erupted which solidified the split and the antagonism has endured. There are no major doctrinal differences but independent development has made them quite different. There are large concentrations of each branch in some countries but small branches in all countries.

The Sunnis are the largest (75%) branch. They are wealthier and more conservative. They embrace both fundamentalists and secularists. Their main base is Saudi Arabia where the Wahabi sect which is very conservative controls the society. The position of women is severely relegated yet thirty percent of all university students are women. The US is generally supportive of the Sunni.

The Shia also have a range of beliefs and their base is in Iran and Iraq. They tend to be less wealthy and more radical.

The Sunni and Shia are equally contemptuous of each other: Saddam, a Sunni, dominated and slaughtered majority Shia in Iraq, yet the Shia fought with Saddam against the Shia of Iran. Assad, an Allawite Shiite, dominates the majority Sunni in Syria. It can be very confusing.

Islam has many other branches and divisions which emphasize one or another aspect of this great religion: the Sufi emphasize mysticism and acetacism. The Salafi are Sunni fundamentalists.

### **Tribalism and Nationalism:**

In the harsh climate of the Middle East survival depended on tribal organization. The European colonial governments often ruled through these tribal groups (Hashemites, Saudis) These groups still constitute the formal identity of many people in the ME. Nationalism is not as prominent except in Egypt and Algeria. Egyptian nationalism stems from their ancient history. Egyptian nationalism is such that they

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would not accept Palestinian refugees even though they are co-religionists. Algerian nationalism arose in the war of independence from France.

### **Muslim Brotherhood**

It started in Egypt in 1928 as a political, social, economic and religious organization dedicated to the international revitalization of Islam. They are dedicated to the education of the masses, establishing hospitals and the elimination of poverty. They advocate democracy and justice for all. Religiously they state: God is our objective, Quran is our constitution, and the Prophet is our leader.

They seek to unify Islamic states and free them from foreign domination. It tolerates varying degrees of rigor and promotes pluralism. In pursuit of these goals they tend to minimize the difference between Shia and Sunni.

### **Salafism:**

Salafism was founded during the 1980's as an alternative to the Brotherhood yet pursuing some of the same goals. They support pan-Islamization which minimizes the distinction between Sunni and Shia and opposes foreign involvement in the region. They are more committed to Sharia law and less interested in reforming government. This makes them less threatening than the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood was seen as a competition to the dictators and were outlawed in Egypt and slaughtered by Hafez Assad in Syria in 1982. The Salafis were a force for revitalization yet they were allowed much more freedom because they were apolitical.

### **Iran:**

The Islamic revolution in Iran gave Iran and the Shia new respectability. They used this momentum to expand their influence in Syria and Lebanon. Iran is playing the 'refusal' card as a way of unifying Islam in opposition to the US and Israel . They are using Shia as a way delegitimizing Saudi-Sunni leadership.

**Post 9/11:**

The US learned that we could only have limited success in establishing our agenda in the ME. We could be successful in Kuwait and Libya but our options in Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran were limited. Anything which we had the power to do would only complicate our long term need for oil.

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Meanwhile after supporting dictatorships which violate our supposed commitment to economic and political freedom we now find ourselves opposing any democratic election which could provide recognition for those who oppose our regional aim. Ideally we seek a non-critical acceptance of US policy for free markets and privatization which would guarantee access to oil and markets for ourselves and our allies.