

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Drawing the Wrong Lessons

by Jon B. Alterman

Husni Mubarak's Egypt was never Saddam Hussein's Iraq. It is an important distinction, and it tells us a great deal about how other Arab rulers will respond to the unrest in recent weeks in Tahrir Square.

In the shorthand accounts that have dominated the press, Husni Mubarak is described as Egypt's 30-year dictator, wrested from power by millions of protestors in the streets of Egypt. And yet, Egyptians enjoyed greater freedom of speech than many other Arabs, and Egypt's economy was nurturing an increasingly robust private sector. Mubarak's end is near, but the danger is that other Arab leaders will draw the wrong lesson from his fall. Rather than concluding that Mubarak was too wed to the ideas of the past, they are likely to conclude he was insufficiently cautious of abandoning those ideas.

In a Freedom House survey of worldwide press freedom last year—one which I've helped put together for several years—Egypt ranked as “partly free,” ahead of every Arab country except Kuwait and Lebanon. In the last decade, Egypt's stolid, dowdy, and state-owned press began giving way to satellite television and the Internet, and an array of independent publications.

The system was still deeply flawed. Police beat a blogger to death in June. Censorship persisted, albeit at lower levels, and journalists were harassed, and sometimes arrested. But even the state understood that its domination of the information space was a lost cause. Many journalists writing for the state-owned *al-Ahram* appeared more often in independent newspapers such as *al-Shorouk*. A journalist with a full-time government job, Muhammad el-Sayed Said, founded an opposition newspaper in 2007 entitled, *al-Badeel*, “The Alternative.” Hagiographic portraits of the president diminished in the Egyptian press, and complaints about the injustices of the current system flourished.

Online, the transition was even more dramatic. Although there were a number of shameful episodes, such as when police used Internet research to bust a homosexuals' party, Egypt's Internet generally developed unshackled. There were

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Love is in the Air

Valentine's Day has captured the hearts of Middle Eastern youth, as well as the minds of shop and hotel owners looking to turn a profit. Heart-shaped balloons and roses line the streets of Cairo and Baghdad; Gulf hotels are awash with Valentine's Day packages. In the past, Abu Dhabi's Emirates Palace Hotel has offered a million-dollar special that includes a week of helicopter rides, camel racing, and yachting. Last year, Demozy FM, an Iraqi radio station, devoted its Valentine's Day broadcast to love songs and commentary about love.

But it is not coming up roses throughout the region. Some governments denounce the holiday for being “Western” and “un-Islamic.” Authorities in Saudi Arabia and Iran have banned the selling of roses, heart-shaped boxes of chocolate, and other Valentine's Day gifts. Some accuse Saudi Arabia's muttawa, or “religious police,” of purging shops of the color red. The Gaza Strip once benefitted mightily from Valentine's Day, exporting cut flowers to markets in Western Europe. Now, Valentine's Day is treated warily, and Hamas officials reportedly canceled Valentine's Day parties and concerts last year.

In some Saudi shops, however, owners keep romantic gifts hidden in back rooms. Couples also circumvent regulations by ordering gifts over the phone. In the Middle East, as elsewhere, love conquers all. ■AH

CSIS Schieffer Series on Egypt

Bob Schieffer interviewed *Al Jazeera* U.S. bureau chief Abderrahim Foukara, McClatchy Newspapers chief Pentagon correspondent Nancy Youssef, and CSIS Middle East Program director Jon Alterman during a CSIS-TCU Schieffer School discussion on the “Implications of the Uprising in Egypt” on February 3. According to Alterman, the Egyptian political system is bigger than Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak may stay or go, but what matters most is whether the outcome strengthens or weakens the status quo. Youssef observed that Egypt's army is sworn to protect the state, not Mr. Mubarak. Foukara argued that the United States was too tentative in responding to the Egyptian hot potato; after a similar response in Tunisia, many in the region see the U.S. stance as a slap in the face. Click [HERE](#) for audio/video recordings of the event. ■

not long lists of banned sites, and bloggers and commentators regularly criticized state institutions. Tech-savvy workarounds gave anonymity to individuals posting critical videos and articles, and those items reached wide audiences. According to the Egyptian government's own statistics, Egyptians accounted for 160,000 blogs in April 2008, of which more than 30,000 were principally political. In January 2010, Egypt had 2.4 million users of Facebook, despite the fact that Internet activists had been using the platform to organize anti-government protests.

In addition, all of the regional satellite television stations maintained extensive reporting operations in Egypt, and their reports had a powerful domestic impact. Comprehensive surveys suggest that more than 70 percent of Egyptians have access to satellite television in their home, meaning that Egyptians find it easy to go beyond government prisms to understand what is happening in their own country.

Economically, Mubarak had also begun to shrug off the policies of the 1950s and 1960s. The Egyptian pound floated freely, banks flourished, and the private sector grew. Subsidies, which ate up more than a third of the entire government budget, were being better targeted, and plans were underway for national health insurance. Mubarak's Egypt was not a democracy, but neither was it a museum piece for the failed strategies of Eastern Europe in the 1970s.

The clear desire of Western governments is that the events in Tunisia and Egypt will provoke an Eastern European-like moment in the Middle East, highlighting the need to open up the information space, attract investment, and to end the "Arab exception" to democratization around the world. The danger, however, is that Arab governments will look at events and draw the opposite conclusion, tamp down on freedom of the press and pursue economic policies that subsidize the public in order to anesthetize it.

In Egypt, at least, the old instincts to control information are back. The Egyptian government shut down the Internet and mobile phone service for most of a week, and its goons attacked journalists in recent days. It is not yet clear how censorship in other Arab countries may manifest itself, but the scant reporting of events in Egypt in many of the local newspapers and on local television suggests that the Egyptian government is not alone in its conclusions.

The old economic game seems to be coming into play as well. Not only did President Mubarak fire the economic reformers in his cabinet, but the government announced a 15 percent pay increase for government workers. Kuwait announced a \$3,500 bonus to every Kuwaiti citizen in honor of national day later this month, and Syria boosted heating oil subsidies. In Jordan, the King dismissed an unpopular cabinet and unveiled \$125 million in new subsidies. After years of counseling patience to impatient populations, rulers have begun to give in to public demands. They are no longer relying on the investment-friendly approaches that built too few jobs, and they are embracing the command-economy subsidies that they had moved away from in the last decade.

The Middle East is at an inflexion point. The hope of many is that the events in Tunisia and Egypt will serve as proof that the old order no longer works, and it must be replaced by politics and economics that are more open and inclusive. The true danger, however, is that governments will conclude that it is the openness of the last decade that is at fault, and the way forward is not to embrace the twenty-first century, but instead to retreat back to the last decades of the twentieth. The early signs are not good, and if the answer to today's problems are more state-led economies and increased censorship, today's problems will be with us for a long time to come. ■2/8/2011

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman and Haim Malka have been cited by news sources around the world and written several short analyses on events in Egypt and Tunisia. Click [HERE](#) to read their coverage.

Moataz Fattah, adjunct fellow at CSIS, comments on how events in Egypt might affect the future of U.S.-Egyptian relations in "[Getting the Message](#)."

Jon Alterman wrote an opinion piece for *Politico* entitled "[Egypt: It's not about Hosni Mubarak](#)."

Jon Alterman wrote an opinion piece for CNN.com entitled "[Perilous Choices for Egypt's Military](#)."

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