
The Struggle for Hegemony in the Muslim World

For half of the last century, Arab nationalists, socialists, communists and others were locked in a battle with the Muslim Brothers for hegemony in the Arab world.—Tariq Ali [1]

The Jihadists who toppled the secular nationalist Gaddafi government—and not without the help of Nato bombers, dubbed “al Qaeda’s air force” [2] by Canadian pilots who participated in the bombing campaign—are no longer disguised in the pages of Western newspapers as a popular movement who thirsted for, and won, democracy in Libya. Now that they’ve overrun the US consulate in Benghazi and killed the US ambassador, they’ve become a “security threat...raising fears about the country’s stability” [3]—exactly what Gaddafi called them, when Western governments were celebrating the Islamists’ revolt as a popular pro-democracy uprising.

Gaddafi’s description of the unrest in his own country as a violent Salafist bid to establish an Islamic state was doubtlessly accepted in Washington and other Western capitals as true, but dismissed in public as a transparent ploy to muster sympathy. This was necessary to sanitize the uprising to secure the acquiescence of Western publics for the intervention of their countries’ warplanes to help Islamic guerillas on the ground topple a secular nationalist leader who was practicing “resource nationalism” and trying to “Libyanize” the economy— the real reasons he’d fallen into disgrace in Washington. [4]

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which played a major part in the rebellion to depose Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, may have plotted the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi which led to the death of US ambassador Christopher Stevens, according to US officials.

The uprising of militant Muslim radicals against a secular state was, in many respects, a replay of what had happened in Afghanistan in the late 1970s, when a Marxist-inspired government came to power with aspirations to lift the country out of backwardness, and was opposed by the Mullahs and Islamist guerillas backed by the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and China.

An Afghan Communist explained that,

“Our aim was no less than to give an example to all the backward countries of the world of how to jump from feudalism straight to a prosperous, just society ... Our choice was not between doing things democratically or not. Unless we did them, nobody else would ... [Our] very first proclamation declared that food and shelter are the basic needs and rights of a human being. ... Our program was clear: land to the peasants, food for the hungry, free education for all. We knew that the mullahs in the villages would scheme against us, so we issued our decrees swiftly so that the masses could see where their real interests lay ... For the first time in Afghanistan’s history women were to be given the right to education ... We told them that they owned their bodies, they would marry whom they liked, they shouldn’t have to live shut up in houses like pens.” [5]

That's not to say that Gaddafi was a Marxist—far from it. But like the reformers in Afghanistan, he sought to modernize his country, and use its land, labor and resources for the people within it. By official Western accounts, he did a good job, raising his country's standard of living higher than that of all other countries in Africa.

Gaddafi claimed that the rebellion in Libya had been organized by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, and by the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which had vowed to overthrow him and return the country to traditional Muslim values, including Sharia law. A 2009 Canadian government intelligence report bore him out. It described the anti-Gaddafi stronghold of eastern Libya, where the rebellion began, "as an 'epicenter of Islamist extremism' and said 'extremist cells' operated in the region."

Earlier, Canadian military intelligence had noted that "Libyan troops found a training camp in the country's southern desert that had been used by an Algerian terrorist group that would later change its name to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb." [6] Significantly, US officials now believe that the AQIM may have plotted the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi. [7]

Abdel Hakim Belhaj, the Libyan rebellion's most powerful military leader, was a veteran of the U.S.-backed Jihad against the Marxist-inspired reformist government in Afghanistan, where he had fought alongside militants who would go on to form al-Qaeda. Belhaj returned to Libya in the 1990s to lead the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which was linked to his al-Qaeda comrades. His aim was to topple Gaddafi, as the Communists had been toppled in Afghanistan.

The prominent role Belhaj played in the Libyan uprising should have aroused suspicions among leftists in the West that, as Western governments surely knew, the uprising was not the heroic pro-democracy affair Western media—and those of reactionary Arab regimes—were making it out to be. Indeed, from the very first day of the revolt, anyone equipped with knowledge of Libyan history that went back further than the last Fox News broadcast, would have known that the Benghazi rebellion was more in the mold of the latest eruption of a violent anti-secular Jihad than a peaceful call for democracy. [8]

"On Feb. 15, 2011, citizens in Benghazi organized what they called a Day of Anger march. The demonstration soon turned into a full-scale battle with police. At first, security forces used tear gas and water cannons. But as several hundred protesters armed with rocks and Molotov cocktails attacked government buildings, the violence spiraled out of control." [9]

As they stormed government sites, the rampaging demonstrators didn't chant, "Power to the people", "We are the 99 percent", or "No to dictatorship." They chanted "'No God but Allah, Moammar is the enemy of Allah'." [10] The Islamists touched off the rebellion and did the fighting on the ground, while U.S.-aligned Libyan exiles stepped into the power vacuum created by Salafist violence and Nato bombs to form a new U.S.-aligned government.

Syria's Hafiz Asad, and other secular nationalists, from his comrade Salaf Jadid, who he overthrew and locked away, to his son, Bashar, who has followed him, have also been denounced as enemies of Allah by the same Islamist forces who violently denounced Gaddafi in Libya and the leaders of the People's Democratic Party in Afghanistan.

The reason for their denunciation by Islamists is the same: their opposition to an Islamic state. Similarly, Islamist forces have been as strongly at the head of the movement to overthrow the secular nationalists in Syria, as they have the secular nationalists in Libya and the (secular) Marxists in the late 1970s-1980s Afghanistan.

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The secular nationalists' rise to power in Syria was a heavy blow to the country's Sunni Islamic militants who resented their society being governed by secular radicals. Worse still from the perspective of the Islamists, the governing radicals were mostly members of minority communities the Sunnis regarded as heretics, and which had occupied the lower rungs of Syrian society. From the moment the secular nationalists captured the state, Islamists went underground to organize an armed resistance. "From their safe haven deep in the ancient warrens of northern cities like Aleppo and Hama, where cars could not enter, the guerrillas emerged to bomb and kill." [11]

In 1980, an attempt was made to group the Sunni opposition to the secular nationalists under an "Islamic Front", which promised free speech, free elections, and an independent judiciary, under the banner of Islam. When militant Islamic terrorists murdered Egyptian president Anwar Sadat a year later in Egypt, Islamists in Damascus promised then president Hafiz Asad the same fate. Then in 1982, Jihadists rose up in Hama—"the citadel of traditional landed power and Sunni puratinism" [12]—in a bid to seize power in the city. The ensuing war of the Islamic radicals against the secular nationalist state, a bloody affair which costs tens of thousands of lives, convinced Asad that "he was wrestling not just with internal dissent, but with a large scale conspiracy to unseat him, abetted by Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and the United States." [13] Patrick Seale, a veteran British journalist who has covered the Middle East for decades, described the Islamists' movement against Syria's secular nationalists as a "sort of fever that (rises) and (falls) according to conditions at home and manipulation from abroad." [14]

Media accounts of Syria's civil war omit mention of the decades-long hostility between Islamists and secular nationalists—a fierce enmity that sometimes flares into open warfare, and at other times simmers menacingly below the surface—that has defined Syria in the post-colonial period. To do so would take the sheen off the armed rising as a popular, democratic, progressive struggle, a depiction necessary to make Western intervention in the form of sanctions, diplomatic support, and other aid, against the secular nationalists, appear just and desirable.

Today, only Trotskyists besotted by fantasies that the Arab Spring is the equivalent of the March 1917 Petrograd uprising, deny that the content of the Syrian uprising is Islamist. But the question of whether the uprising was initially

otherwise—a peaceful, progressive and popular movement aimed at opening democratic space and redressing economic grievances—and only later hijacked by Islamists, remains in dispute. What’s clear, however, is that the “hijacking”, if indeed there was one, is not of recent vintage. In the nascent stages of the rebellion, the late New York Times reporter Anthony Shadid noted that the “most puritanical Islamists, known by their shorthand as Salafists, have emerged as a force in Egypt, Libya, Syria and elsewhere, with suspicions that Saudi Arabia has encouraged and financed them.”[15]

Secular nationalists, socialists and communists in Muslim lands have struggled with the problem of Islamist opposition to their programs, to their atheism (in the case of communists) and to the secular character of the state they have sought to build. The Bolsheviks, perhaps alone among this group, were successful in overcoming opposition in the traditional Muslim territories they controlled in Central Asia, and improving the lives of women, who had been oppressed by conservative Islam. Female seclusion, polygamy, bride price, child and forced marriages, veiling (as well as circumcision of males, considered by the Bolsheviks to be child abuse) were outlawed. Women were recruited into administrative and professional positions and encouraged – indeed obligated – to work outside the home. This followed Friedrich Engels’ idea that women could only be liberated from the domination of men if they had independent incomes. [16]

Western governments, led by the United States, have made a practice of inflaming the Islamists’ hostility to secular nationalists, socialists and communists, using militant Muslim radicals as a cat’s paw to topple these governments, which have almost invariably refused to align themselves militarily with the United States or cut deals against the interests of their own people to fatten the profits of corporate America and enrich Wall Street investment bankers. But whether Washington aggravates fault lines within Muslim societies or not, the fact remains that the fault lines exist, and must be managed, but have not always been managed well.

For example, no matter how admirable their aims were, the reformers in Afghanistan had too narrow a political base to move as quickly as they did, and they rushed headlong into disaster, ignoring Moscow’s advice to slow down and expand their support. The Carter and Reagan administrations simply took advantage of their blunders to build a committed anti-communist guerilla movement.

Salah Jadid, who Hafiz Asad overthrew and locked away. Jadid pursued an unapologetically leftist program, and boasted of practicing “scientific socialism.” The Soviets thought otherwise. Jadid came to power in a conspiracy and never had more than a narrow base of support.

The leftist Syrian regime of Salah Jadid, which Hafiz Asad overthrew, did much that would be admired by leftists today. Indeed, Tariq Ali, in an apology apparently intended to expiate the sin of seeming to support the current Asad government, lauds Jadid’s regime as the “much more enlightened predecessor whose leaders and activists...numbered in their ranks some of the finest intellectuals of the Arab world.” [17]

It’s easy to see why Ali admired Asad’s predecessors. Jadid, who lived an austere life, refusing to take advantage of his position to lavish himself with riches and comforts, slashed the salaries of senior ministers and top bureaucrats. He replaced their black Mercedes limousines with Volkswagens and Peugeot 404s. People connected with the old influential families were purged from government. A Communist was brought into the cabinet. Second houses were confiscated,

and the ownership of more than one was prohibited. Private schools were banned. Workers, soldiers, peasants, students and women became the regime's favored children. Feudalists and reactionaries were suppressed. A start was made on economic planning and major infrastructure projects were undertaken with the help of the Soviets.

And yet, despite these clearly progressive measures, Jadid's base of popular support remained narrow—one reason why the Soviets were lukewarm toward him, regarding him as a hothead, and contemptuous of his claim to be practicing "scientific socialism." [18] Scientific socialism is based on mass politics, not a minority coming to power through a conspiracy (as Jadid and Asad had) which then attempts to impose its utopian vision on a majority that rejects it.

Jadid backed the Palestinian guerrillas. Asad, who was then minister of defense, was less enamored of the guerrillas, who he saw as handing Israel pretexts for war. Jadid defined the bourgeoisie as the enemy. Asad wanted to enlist their backing at home to broaden the government's base of support against the Muslim Brothers. Jadid spurned the reactionary Arab regimes. Asad was for unifying all Arab states—reactionary or otherwise—against Israel. [19]

Asad—who Ali says he opposed—recognized (a) that a program of secular nationalist socialism couldn't be implemented holus bolus without mass support, and (b) that the government didn't have it. So, after toppling Jadid in a so-called "corrective" movement, he minimized class warfare in favor of broadening his government's base, trying to win over merchants, artisans, business people, and other opponents of the regime's nationalizations and socialist measures.

At the same time, he retained Jadid's commitment to a dirigiste state and continued to promote oppressed classes and minorities. This was hardly a stirring program for Marxist purists—in fact it looked like a betrayal—but the Soviets were more committed to Asad than Jadid, recognizing that his program respected the world as it was and therefore had a greater chance of success. [20]

In the end, however, Asad failed. Neither he nor his son Bashar managed to expand the state's base of support enough to safeguard it from destabilization. The opposition hasn't been conjured up out of nothing by regime change specialists in Washington. To be sure, regime change specialists have played a role, but they've needed material to work with, and the Asad's Syria has provided plenty of it.

Nor did Gaddafi in Libya finesse the problem of mixing the right amount of repression and persuasion to engineer a broad enough consent for his secular nationalist rule to survive the fever of Salafist opposition rising, as Patrick Seale writes, according to conditions at home and manipulation from abroad.

The machinations of the United States and reactionary Arab regimes to stir up and strengthen the secular nationalists' opponents made the knot all the more difficult to disentangle, but outside manipulation wasn't the whole story in Gaddafi's demise (though it was a significant part of it) and hasn't been the sole, or even a large part of the, explanation for the uprising in Syria.

The idea that the Syrian uprising is a popular, democratic movement against dictatorship and for the redress of economic grievances ignores the significant history of struggle between secularist Arab nationalists and the Muslim Brothers, mistakenly minimizes the role of Salafists in the uprisings, and turns a blind eye to Washington's longstanding practice of using radical Muslim activists as a cat's paw against Arab nationalist regimes.

The idea that the uprisings in either country are popular, democratic movements against dictatorship and for the redress of economic grievances, (a) ignores the significant history of struggle between secularist Arab nationalists and the Muslim Brothers, (b) mistakenly minimizes the role of Salafists in the uprisings, and (c) turns a blind eye to Washington's longstanding practice of using radical Muslim activists as a cat's paw against Arab nationalist regimes that are against sacrificing local interests to the foreign trade and investment interests of Wall Street and corporate America.

With Islamists lashing out violently against US embassies in the Middle East, their depiction by US state officials and Western media as pro-democracy fighters for freedom may very well be supplanted by the labels used by Gaddafi and Asad to describe their Islamist opponents, labels that are closer to the truth –“religious fanatics” and “terrorists.”

Reactionary Islam may have won the battle for hegemony in the Muslim world, as Tariq Ali asserts, and with it, the United States, which has often manipulated it for its own purposes, but the battle has yet to be won in Syria, and one would hope, never will be.

That's what's at stake in the country: not a fragile, popular, egalitarian, pro-democracy movement, but the last remaining secular Arab nationalist regime, resisting both the oppressions and obscurantism of the Muslim Brothers and the oppressions and plunder of imperialism.

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<http://gowans.wordpress.com/2012/09/15/the-struggle-for-hegemony-in-the-muslim-world/>

Endnotes

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