



January 7, 2016

Did the ‘Twitter Revolutions’ Fail?

by **Nibras Kazimi**

<https://talisman-gate.com/2016/01/07/did-the-twitter-revolutions-fail/>

An essay in response to I. Krastev, on the fifth anniversary of the Arab Spring

Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev penned a compelling, smart and mostly valid Op-Ed for the *New York Times* (Nov. 11, 2015) under the title ‘Why Did the ‘Twitter Revolutions’ Fail?’

To my mind, Krastev has succeeded in writing the smartest indirect put down of the redemptive qualities of liberalism that I have read in recent years. I disagree with it, but I respect the comprehensiveness and boldness of his argument. However, I had to give him the benefit of the doubt before countering, after all, how much of an argument can he buttress within the strictly edited, word-count poor confines of a *Times* Op-Ed. To do so, I read his

recent book, *Democracy Disrupted, The Global Politics of Protest* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) from which many of the points and wording of the Op-Ed were culled.

Essentially, Krastev is making the Realist case against giving too much of historical significance to the global protest movements, which began with the Arab Spring and then spread to many societies around the world, including those in the West. Krastev's case is particularly germane to how the Realist school of politics has understood the Middle East for the past seventy years, and the policy prescriptions they have offered in dealing with the region's challenges. His argument lends itself to an existing debate among Western policy circles about whether democracy is a good fit for the nations of the Middle East, as opposed to sticking with the status quo. This debate began—and in some people's minds, ended—in Iraq. The Realists would, after having been taken by surprise when the Arab Spring burst onto the scene, brandish Krastev's writings as evidence that they were right.

The only problem is that they are fundamentally wrong, and however much they argue otherwise, the evidence of their mistakes in the Middle East, beginning with the attacks of September 11, 2001, through the Arab Spring, and now with the rise of ISIS, should have put the debate to rest. But it hasn't, and yet another round of Realist mistakes is in the making.

The Realists are committed proponents of the status quo. They maintain that the best that can be hoped, when crafting policy, is a constant state of crisis management and damage control. They seek to bolster order where it reigns, and to contain the rogue elements that may encroach upon it. They come across as the haggard, exasperated staff of an Emergency Room, attempting to manage the carnage of chaos and stanch the bloodshed. They have no time for big, pre-emptive remedies such as liberalism. It is difficult to argue with such a state of mind when suggesting that an ideological vaccine may mitigate the contagion of chaos.

The fundamental delusion of the Realists is their assumption that the status quo is sustainable. They did not see the attacks on New York City and the Pentagon coming. The stubbornness of their presupposition blinded them from seeing that the protest movements of the Middle East may have presented the opportunity for the long awaited vaccine. They are similarly obstinate when assessing the early legacy of those protests. Krastev dismisses this legacy and belittles it. He is mistaken.

Krastev begins his case by second-guessing Marx, Hugo, Proudhon, de Tocqueville and Bagehot about the significance of Napoleon's 1851 coup, asserting "they all mistook the end of Europe's three-year revolutionary wave for its beginning."

He finds a parallel with how the Western media mistook the protests of Turkey, Russia, Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen, to be the harbingers of a new revolutionary wave, and poses this question as his central thesis: "It is commonplace to ask why the 'Twitter revolutions' are in retreat. But the more intriguing question is why we were so convinced that they would succeed in the first place."

Krastev picks out the West's 'political narcissism' as the culprit. He holds that a Pollyannaish delusion blind-sighted Western eyes that read too much into those protests, foolishly assuming that they were positivist movements leaping towards democracy that were unleashed by the 'utopian possibilities' of new technology. He correctly admonishes the protest movements as anti-establishmentarian, that the protesters had failed to formulate what type of order should replace the status quo. Krastev finds merit and validation in the status quo—'the party of order'—by citing its ability to strike back at what is essentially, in his eyes, chaos. And he is not alone—much of the Western policy circles think along the same lines. How brave his thesis would have been had it not been the doctrine by which Western governments have responded to these movements (see the Obama administration's very Realist policies).

The inherent weakness of Krastev's assessment of the historical significance of the protests lies at the foundation of his argument: if the revolutionaries did not know what they had set out to do, then how can we judge whether they succeeded or failed by their inability to meet their goals?

Recent history demonstrates that the 'West' was in a mindset that deeply mistrusted the protest movements as they were unfolding, and there is one reason for that: Iraq (see the Realist editorial line of the *New York Times* on the topic over the last decade and a half). Similarly, revolutionary history tells us that intellectuals rarely take other intellectuals seriously, until the types of revolutionary men and women who were manning the barricades in the city center succeed, eventually, in storming the Winter Palace; it took seventy years to vindicate Marx, Hugo, Proudhon et al.

Bassem Youssef, referred to in the Western press as 'Egypt's Jon Stewart' and who turned his comedic YouTube show into a new media phenomenon across the Arabic-speaking world, is in a hurry to be vindicated, and expresses that hurry bluntly. Speaking to an audience in Australia a few days before Krastev's piece was published, Youssef said: "For those who come to me now and say, 'Well, the Arab Spring has failed or the Middle East is not ready for democracy,' I just answer back... 'Get stuffed'."

His show was shut down by the 'party of order' in Egypt. But Youssef provides a preview for what will become of the protesters: "They might come across as helpless and unable to make change, but deep inside they are rejecting the status quo," he said in his Sydney address. "They are silently revolting against the same taboos that were deemed untouchable. They are questioning everything. Nothing is sacred. Nothing is off limits."

Youssef's preview of what comes next is valid, but he misses another latent Twitter revolution that is unfolding: the resurgence of the extremist narratives that empower Sunni and Shia jihadists across the Middle East—also busily rejecting the status quo.

It is that other, darker revolution that compels us now, yet again, to find an ideological vaccine for the failings of Realism and the status quo it upholds. Ironically, that experimental vaccine is being beta-tested in Iraq. Its brand name is *madaniyya*.



Baghdad protests. Credit: Karim Kadhim, AP

What were the 'Twitter Revolutions'?

Krastev sets out to capture the meaning of events. He writes that he was inspired to undertake this task by the protests in his native Bulgaria, and that the protests in Russia, Turkey and Thailand are central to his argument. He describes his aim as modest, but his breadth, in finding the common thread through protests in seventy countries, and by sifting through the "big data" they produced in word and form, is anything but.

Krastev revisits many definitions for the 'Twitter Revolutions'. They were 'global' popular protests comprised of 'individuals with different political views and agendas' who succeeded in fashioning a common language with a common message. Spontaneous, leaderless, nonviolent, citing Thomas Friedman's term "square people" and Francis Fukuyama's characterization of the "revolution of the global middle class". Krastev believes that this global protest wave and "networks of hope" pushed societies into polarization, and that this polarization empowered the likes of Turkey's Erdogan and Russia's Putin to push back in favor for consolidation around

the state and the national leader. Krastev calls this pushback “a new anti-cosmopolitan moment.” The West failed to understand who would come out as the victor from this confrontation between the revolutionaries and the status quo because it suffers from a state of ‘liberal teleology’ that places too much faith in the redemptive power of Western-style democracy.

Finally, the delusion and tenuous cohesion of social media networking was no match for the expectations of conservative-leaning societal majorities, who trust the stability and constancy of a ‘strong’ state rather than the pretty words of a poet.

Krastev understands the need for classifications among the examples he cites, but in making his argument, he ignores the importance of categorization. The crux of his argument is that the protesters are anti-establishmentarian and anti-elite, but lack an alternative vision. They have taken democracy and change through elections for granted. They lack patience, and wallow in personal aggrandizement. They would rather take ‘selfies’ of themselves as individualistic activists than cast ballots or join a party, or unionize. I would maintain that this rings true for the category of protests we have seen in established democracies, an extreme example being the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement. Here, Krastev’s thoughtful and innovative reading of the protests in the West captures the meaning of events. However, as we move towards other classifications such as those of new democracies (Russia and Bulgaria, for example) one can see fissures in the argument—one that the intellectually honest Krastev points out himself. I maintain that his argument falls apart when we study the case of the Middle East, where the protest movements began.

If judged by the Middle Eastern protests, Krastev’s definitions are wrong on three counts: that the protests were ‘liberal’ and middle class, that the protesters were enamored with ‘technological utopianism’, and that the status quo is motivated by the static cynicism of order for order’s sake.

The ‘Twitter Revolutions’ (a handle that itself smacks of dismissiveness) were revolutions of the center. Not a class center, and not a political one either. It was the center of the lowest common denominator. Dissenters, many of them middle-class, were called upon from their salons and cafes, where they had been brooding against the status quo—Youssef was brooding in the doctors lounge somewhere in Cairo—to go to the town square and agree on what constitutes basic human decency. This was no referendum on Western-style democracy and liberalism, and it certainly was not a euphoric celebration of the Silicon Valley ethos of ‘destructive innovation’ as Krastev puts it. Twitter and other social media were tools much as the pamphleteer’s press was in mid-19th century Europe. In Tunisia, the lowest common denominator they agreed upon held that a fruit vendor should not be forced to burn himself alive to escape economic despair. In Egypt, they agreed that it was wrong to have a young activist bludgeoned to death by the state’s security apparatus. In 2009, preceding these two

events, protesters in Iran rallied because they played by the regime's rules and voted. But the regime undermined the rules when the results were not to its liking. In 2005, the Lebanese could not stomach the thought that the Syrian regime should be allowed to kill one of their country's leaders in a massive suicide attack. In the last of the great protests of the Middle East, in Istanbul, a society decided that they don't want to see firehoses directed against activists who were merely trying to protect a bunch of trees. But what began as the moral indignation of a liberal middle class moved something in the consciousness of many other sectors of society, so they too started moving towards the squares. Critically, the most important phenomenon of the squares was the conversation it occasioned between all those varying agendas, which was far more important than what they were shouting in defiance of the state. It was the return of open political discourse to the Middle East after a long absence. Very quickly, they managed to agree on expanding the lowest common denominator. In Tunisia, they agreed that they should return to the genteel politics of their country's 1960s and 1970s. In Egypt, they agreed that they do not like the prospect of autocrats turning their authority into a dynasty. In Turkey, they agreed that the foundational myths of their country are outdated, and it is time to see the colorful composition of Turkish society for what it is, a strength for their Turkish nation rather than a threat to Turkish nationalism.

Lumping in Syria, Libya and Yemen, with the cases above is misleading. On the spectrum of relativity, the status quo in Damascus, Tripoli and Sana'a (let us not also forget Bahrain's capital, Manama) leaned towards the end-point of menacing dictatorships rather than to the end-point of mostly-benign autocracies. The transgressions against basic human decency perpetrated over decades were far more acute, and there was more hurt and more angry people, with good reason to be. Those transgressions manifested themselves in how the status quo reacted, extremely, against dissent.

Bringing in Russia and the Ukraine into the conversation merely clouds our understanding further. Their rich traditions of revolution and intellectualism, and their experience of Western-style autocracy and totalitarianism—and more recently, elections and democracy—belongs in a Western category.

It seems that the occasion of Krastev's Op-Ed in the *Times* was that the second round of the Turkish elections early this month validated his book's point, whereas the first round conducted in June challenged it at its core. The results of the June election came about because of the protests of Gezi Park in 2013.

Did Erdogan's election victory vindicate Realism?

President Erdogan didn't like the results of the first round of national elections. He escaped forward by picking a fight with the Kurds. Erdogan's form of 'order' was willing to employ adventurism and disorder towards coldly-calculated political ends; his cynicism, and his brand

of the status quo, were never static. He felt compelled to do that because the challenge he faced in Gezi Park had borne an unimagined byproduct: change through the force of hope. It is ironic that Gezi Park could only happen because of Erdogan's previous adventurism, when he went after, and tamed, the Turkish 'Deep State'. Empowered by a constituency buoyed by real economic success, and one that had been exhausted by political bickering and the Kurdish insurgency over decades, Erdogan arrived at the right moment when the Turkish military and its Kemalist ideal was most vulnerable. He boldly rent through the fissures and succeeded, albeit employing questionable tactics of peddling conspiracy and manipulating the judiciary and the media.

Erdogan's adventurist feat created room for a conversation. This conversation, like the one that had unfolded previously in Egypt's Tahrir Square, found expression in the squatter tents of Gezi Park. What sets the protesters in Turkey apart from those in Europe, was that they were contending with a legacy of identity, and in this, their challenge was more Middle Eastern than European.

Modern Turkey almost belongs in the European category, but not quite so. It has one of the strongest economies in Europe, its foundational myths are distinctly Western inspired (in this case, rightist nationalism), and it aspired to join the European Union. Gezi Park lies geographically in Europe. At one time, Mr. Krastev's hometown was ruled from the vicinity of the park.

I judge modern Turkey to be not-quite-European through this personal anecdote: a few months before Gezi Park, I was walking along Istanbul's main European thoroughfare, Istiklal Caddesi. I passed a crowd of two dozen youths who had gathered around a band of young singers. They were singing and clapping their hands. Their songs were Kurdish nationalist ones. This was happening fifty meters away from the riot police that one can find perennially parked by the ornate gate of the Galatasaray high school. I was stunned: Turkey had come a long way over the past decade, when expressions of Kurdish identity could still get one in trouble. The acceptance of a unique Kurdish identity within Turkey was a litmus test; in fact it is one of the benchmarks the EU has set to judge Turkey's accreditation. Ataturk's legacy was laicism. He wanted Turkey to become a Western power. When the bulk of the West headed towards liberalism and the tolerance of unique identities within national narratives, Turkey lingered behind, tethered down by Kemalism, because it could not come to terms with a challenge such as that of Kurdish identity. As such, this was a culture that resisted change, in a distinctly non-Western manner. But change, slow-coming, did eventually come, and it blossomed in Gezi Park.

I got to see the phenomenon on its last day, in fact in its final hour. I left before realizing that this was to be its end when the riot police marched in for what turned out to be the final time. Gathered there were all the pieces of the Turkish puzzle that had resisted Ataturk's

forced forging of a national Turkish identity, in his own image for the most part. There was a Kurdish dance underway. One of the dancers wore a shirt emblazoned with the Kurdish flag and the caption 'Kurdistan'. The trinkets and talismans of Alevism, a pseudo-Shi'ite religion, were being hawked alongside slices of watermelon. Transvestites sat with their backs leaning against dapper Istanbulites from 'White Turk' pedigrees. If one knows where to look, one could also spot members of the shadowy Gulenist religious order circulating among the tents. This was no sugary expression of transient camaraderie. In the true Turkish manner, it was a stern nod from one set of unique identities towards another—"I see you, and I don't mind that you are here, sharing our common space." This was unprecedented, and exceptionally powerful. Rather than a carnival, Gezi Park was an outdoor museum of ethnography, sociology, class hierarchy, and even sexual orientation. It was everything that Kemalism had tried to deny or paper-over; it was a conversation that Turkey had to have with itself, an acknowledgment of itself as it is, before it could move forward.



Contrary to the predictions Krastev put down in *Democracy Disrupted*, the Gezi Park phenomenon did move forward, and it found expression, and leadership, in a retooled vehicle for Kurdish identity politics, the People's Democratic Party, HDP. A few months before the first round of Turkish elections, I met a friend, a journalist (not a Kurd), at a posh outdoor

setting. She began to extoll the virtues of the HDP, encouraging me to meet its young leader, Selahattin Demirtas. She was telling how many liberal voters are going to sway their ballots to the HDP in a strategic push across the ten percent threshold. All I could think to do while she was speaking was to ask her to keep her voice down and to shush up. I was worried that the company at the table over would overhear her. In my mind, the HDP was still what it always was, a front for the PKK, the Kurdish terrorist organization that had roiled the country's southeast in a decades-long civil war. I was wrong. Turkey had changed. The spirit of Gezi Park had propelled it along.

I had asked another Turkish friend who I knew from college how he had voted. He was a true cynic, and I was prepared for a "why should I vote?" answer. He surprised me by saying, "I voted for the HDP. For the Armenian candidate." My friend's father was Jewish, and his mother a Muslim Turk. His choice of candidate surprised me as much as his act of voting. When questioned as to why he did that, he said, "because they reflect my principles." He was no 'strategic' voter; the option of voting for the HDP had turned him into a believer. He himself was surprised when he learnt that his mother had voted for them too, after decades of loyalty to the 'Kemalist' party.

The strategic victory of the HDP in June almost put an end to Erdogan's long reign, which oscillated from the direct (as Prime Minister) to the indirect (from his current perch as President). Erdogan escaped forwards by unleashing a new military adventure. He brought back the haunting specter of the PKK by resuming warfare against it; the PKK obliged him to battle because they were just as threatened by what Demirtas represented. Demirtas was the portal to the future created by Gezi Park; he was even called the 'Kurdish Obama'. Through him, Turkey would outgrow identity politics. The old crusty warriors of the PKK wouldn't have any of that. Neither would Erdogan. New life was breathed into identity politics, specifically on the Kurdish issue, to repolarize Turkish society. It worked, to an extent, as Krastev's points out in the 'I-told-you-so update' to his thesis, published as the *Times* Op-Ed. But Krastev misses a crucial point: Erdogan burnt through his credentials as a transformer of Turkish society (after having launched the 'Kurdish Opening', among other initiatives) just to win back a clutch of parliamentary seats for his party. Erdogan's victory in the second round of elections on Nov. 1 was a pyrrhic one, it wasn't enough of a victory to recast Turkey in his own image (he would need a two third majority in parliament for constitutional changes; the seats won for his party fall short of that), because Gezi Park had changed Turkey first. Erdogan now has to face a country split down the middle, polarized for the most part against his ambitions. That, to me, does not seem like a very stable order of things. Erdogan escaped forwards into disorder. And the HDP, and Demirtas, are still around to challenge him.

When we look back at the protests of the Middle East, we can discern that some were about the reintroduction of politics (Tunisia and Egypt, for example, with the status quo reclaiming

ground in the latter), while, in the Turkish example, the protests were about outgrowing identity politics. Whether any of this shall move forward, whereby it eventually settles into the mold of 'politics as usual', in the Western sense, is too early to tell. Some protests lit up civil wars, namely in Libya, Syria and Yemen. The protesters there cannot be faulted for rising up against the status quo; they understood the risk that the status quo would strike back harshly. But they judged that the time had come. They were partly right in their judgement: the status quo was too feeble to beat them back fully, and the result is the stalemate of ongoing civil wars that compel Western and regional intervention to varying degrees.

All these stages (reintroduction of politics, identity politics, the status quo trying to assert itself, and civil war) played out, and continue to play out in Iraq. Iraq was the first place in which the status quo was brought down by foreign intervention. The proponents of the status quo in Washington, the Realists, contend that the folly of tinkering with a tolerably well-contained example of the 'status quo' such as that of Iraq's amounted to 'Original Sin' and that Western liberalism, in advancing democracy there, had taken a fateful bite from a forbidden apple.

How does Iraq fit in the Realist argument?

The rest of the regimes of the Middle East perceived that America's remaking of Iraq would result in an existential challenge to the entire foundation of the region's status quo. The head of the Arab League famously said that, "it would open up the gates of Hell." The King of Jordan warned of a Shi'ite Crescent. Qatar's Aljazeera spared no moment of airtime denouncing what America was trying to do. The vestiges of Saddam's status quo were still around after their regime's collapse, and they were very angry. Arab Sunnis felt that their traditional hold on power was at stake, and that the Shi'ites and Kurds were going to come at them with revenge. All mobilized to actively drive home the message that tinkering with Iraq is a mistake. The fray was joined by jihadists such as the Jordanian Abu Musaab Al-Zarqawi. The Asad regime in Syria, smugly sat back and allowed jihadists to stream in, after having sent thousands of volunteers to fight alongside its longtime nemesis Saddam right at the end of his reign.

The status quo regimes had a variety of reasons for doing what they did, but a principal one was to be able to tell a cautionary tale by which to frighten their people. Throughout my journeys in Syria, I would hear an oft-repeated refrain: "Change means we become like Iraq," and Iraq looked very bad to them.

Iraq was not destined to become a quagmire as Washington's proponents of the status quo had predicted. Iraq turned into the hellish visage it became after 2003 because the regional forces of the status quo found common cause with anti-democratic and anti-American revolutionaries streaming in from across the Muslim world.

Could democracy have worked in Iraq? There was certainly much arrayed against it. The forces of the status quo were not the only ones working against it; Iraq had just emerged from a decades long totalitarian nightmare, multiple wars, and international sanctions. The Iraqi society that American troops encountered in April 2003 was one of the most traumatized societies in modern times.

Democracy already had a steep slope to climb. Its prospects were not helped when the Realists within the Bush administration developed second thoughts right at the beginning of the venture. Had Grand Ayatollah Sistani not insisted on a constitution, and on elections, then the Coalition Provisional Authority (as well as the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, and the State Department) would have been comfortable if Ayad Allawi or a similar 'strong man' had turned Iraq into a relatively benign autocracy similar to the Hosni Mubarak model.

The Realist instinct is hardwired into the institutional psyche of America's foreign policy establishment. The CIA and State Department are relatively young organizations that were tasked with managing America's role in the world after World War II. Their institutional wisdom, after the global carnage had passed, saw merit and validity in maintaining the status quo. But the status quo is never static. Rogue actors and adventurists kept pushing the envelope, and containment was not enough of a counterstrategy for some thinkers within these institutions. Dissent emerged. The dissenters prescribed a more activist and preemptive strategy. In some instances, they got their way. A succession of such responses were perceived to be costly failures: the Korea War, the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, among others. Institutional wisdom would counsel a return to the comfort of maintaining the status quo, and 'containing' the challengers. By the end of the Carter Administration, the US Embassy in Tehran and its CIA station was overrun by Iranian revolutionaries who had just brought down a model example of the status quo, the Shah's regime. America didn't have an appetite for confrontation, so it tried what it could to 'contain' the adventurists.

Those who dissented against the Realist ethos flocked to Reagan's side in his quest to hurry the defeat of the Soviet Union. The status quo of the Soviet regime was buckling, and they sensed opportunity to quicken the fall. Many of them would later become proponents of bringing democracy to Iraq. The Realists drew a line in the sand and called their opposite camp 'the neocons'.

But it wasn't neocons who lit the spark of the Iraq War. It was the Egyptian Muhammad Atta, the lead conspirator of September 11. It is curious how Paris, still shaken by terrorist attacks two months ago, serves to remind us of the magnitude of what happened over America's skies and to America's self-confidence 14 years ago.

It didn't help the Realist argument that three of the four pilots grew up in countries that were upheld as paragons of the validity of the status quo: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United

Arab Emirates. The fourth grew up in Lebanon, where regional adventurers such as Syria, Iran, Iraq, the PLO, Israel and Saudi Arabia turned its tradition of identity politics into the Lebanese Civil War. On that fateful Tuesday, as the towers collapsed, the Realists were as surprised as everyone else by the first tremors of an entire system buckling under in the Middle East.

Given the shock at the magnitude of what had just happened, it is not surprising that some argued America could no longer live with a status quo in which a rogue actor with possible access to WMD technology may find common cause with an enemy such as Al-Qaeda. The Realists had been too embarrassed by their failure to put up much of a counter argument. When the WMDs weren't found, the Realists turned that into their comeback moment; neglecting to address that the conceptual threat was valid right after September 11. After catching their breath, they tried to mitigate damage by putting notions of an Iraqi democracy in a deep freeze, citing its history, and the threat of such a 'reckless' experiment would have on the delicate and bruised status quo of the rest of the region. They almost had their way, but did not expect that a challenge from Sistani would push democracy through.

Despite incredible odds, many segments of Iraqi society opted for the ballot box. They headed out to polling stations despite the threats issued, and that were acted upon, by insurgents. The world was moved by the images of men and women holding up a purple stained finger. Their choice of candidates may not have been stellar, and yes, elections don't constitute a democracy, but political life had returned to the country after an absence of five decades. For the first time since the establishment of the country, Iraqis had to grapple with identity politics by finding ways of managing diversity and separatist tendencies, within the confines of a political conversation, rather than through chemical weapons, genocide and mass deportation as Saddam had done. It wasn't democracy yet, but it was well on its way. By 2010, as the Americans were preparing to leave, even Iraq's Sunnis had come around. They put down their weapons and began to vote.

Did the protesters in Syria subconsciously process the images of those purple fingers on TV and decide that Iraq may not have been so bad after all? Did that realization encourage them on gambling on change anyway, even if things may turn out as Iraq did? Would Turks and Kurds in Turkey have been able to conceive of a normalized Kurdish identity working within a state had they not seen the Kurds of Iraq do it first?

Would things have turned out differently had the Obama administration embraced the Arab Spring protests early on, instead of prevaricating? Let's not be too hard on President Obama. The democracy agenda had already withered under President Bush. The troubles of the Iraq 'quagmire' had defanged it. As early as 2006, the Realists were ascendant, the neocons discredited.

After the Iraq experience, I learned to respect the staying power of the status quo. I no longer dismissed it out of hand, and I listened carefully to what the Realists had to say. Their

most cogent argument was that the status quo can liberalize slowly, and turn away from cynicism and adventurism towards good (or good enough) governance. My transformation was not unique, many of the anti-Realist crowd, including many 'neoon' luminaries, were willing to listen to such persuasive arguments. They were licking their wounds after Washington's policy knife fights had subsided. Some saw hope in the prospect of even a regime such as Libya's eventually liberalizing on its own; they accepted invitations to dine with Colonel Qaddafi, whom Reagan had bombed and deemed a loon.

My travels in Egypt and Syria seemingly confirmed some aspects of the liberalizing process; their economies were opening up, and there was more relief than dissent. Kuwait was turning into a 'good enough' democracy. Dubai was booming. The Saudi royal family under King Abdullah seemed to regain its confidence after September 11; the Osama Bin Laden threat to their rule had not materialized. Foreign media fawned over the glamor couples of Mubarak Jr., Assad, and Jordan's King Abdullah, and their spouses. The Sultan of Oman was wise and his country was at peace after having been roiled by civil war in the 1970s. Iran chose Ahmedinejad and nuclear ambitions, but it was firmly contained. Tourists were flocking to Tunis, where an autocrat kept any form of opposition in check. The Lebanese had regained their sovereignty after the first dress rehearsal of the Arab Spring had occurred in Beirut in 2005, but the country was still stuck in confessional politics. The Yemeni ambassador in Washington was charming and popular, a fixture of the party scene among policy makers and analysts. Bahrain even sent a Jewish female (from a religious minority there that only counts 37 members) to represent it in DC.

Apart from Iraq, the status quo in the Middle East was humming along, much as it had for decades. The status quo had proved its endurance as the Realists had long argued. The best one could hope for was a slow-paced liberalizing here and there. I remained uneasy about it, even when I tried to suppress my biases and study the validity status quo from a strategic perspective. There was still something off about it all; the attacks of September 11 and the jihadist mayhem in Iraq did not fit in neatly with the dominant, newly vindicated Realist narrative. I remained unconvinced even when the story had come full circle: the Obama administration was intent on striking a deal with Assad, despite what he did to stymie America in Iraq, and despite reasserting his malign influence over Lebanon. Hezbollah would provoke Israel once in a while, and Israel would counter, but it stopped there. The United States, even Israel, could live with such mischief, holding out hope that a deal would bring a regime such as Assad's to see the merits of good behavior. Assad smugly played to those hopes.

But then a fruit vendor in Tunisia set himself on fire. The status quo collapsed. That grin was wiped off Assad's face.

Did the status quo make itself vulnerable to dissent by liberalizing itself? Or was it never that stable to begin with?

Answering these two questions will go a long way towards understanding what the protests of the Middle East meant, as Krastev partially set out to do. Getting these answers right is critical in countering the grand vision of the other Twitter revolutionaries, the jihadists and the retro-revolutionaries of Iran such as General Qasim Suleimani, busily disseminating a new, dark narrative. The forces of disorder that they represent and act for are cannibalizing the carcass of the old order that has just collapsed. What they seek to build in its wake is downright scary. They are empowered by clear and ambitious narratives, as David Ignatius recently demonstrated in *The Atlantic* concerning the case of the jihadists. They have their own set of 'Big Ideas'—ones anathema to liberalism. The remnants of the status quo cannot match them in that ideological terrain, simply because they cannot come up with any Big Ideas of their own. Sadly, after the recent experiences of Iraq, Iran in 2009, the Arab Spring, and the HDP, many Western observers assume that the Big Ideas of democracy and liberalism are too sullied, or too feeble, to put up a fight.

***Madaniyya*—A New Hope**

By sheer coincidence (or is it?) the modern-day state of Iraq posed one of the biggest challenges to the post WWII order of the status quo. The CIA and the State Department have had to apply all sorts of remedies to make their Realist argument work. Iraq entered into one of the bloodiest and longest wars of the post-world war era, against Iran. The Realists found this to be auspicious—Iraq would take care of their Iran problem where Carter couldn't. Barely two years after the cessation of that war, Iraq lunged at the status quo of the Persian Gulf. The Realists had hoped that Saddam's regime would liberalize. They were taken back when it ventured into Kuwait and began making noises against Saudi Arabia. The Realists assembled the first international coalition of armies in the post-Cold War era to force Saddam to color within the lines. Then they imposed the most far-reaching system of sanctions to tether Saddam's ambitions, calling its policy of restraining him together with Iran that of 'Dual Containment'. They enforced No-Fly Zones so that he wouldn't massacre Iraq's Kurds, again. Once in a while, President Clinton would have to authorize bombing runs to keep Saddam at bay. The Realists tried to assuage the detrimental effect of sanctions through the UN's Oil-for-Food program, only to watch helplessly as Saddam subverted it to his own aims, in some cases by bribing UN officials and their kin from its proceeds. He kept killing people, but the Realists never took that as a *casus belli*, justifiably so from their distant perspectives. Even after September 11, the Realists deeply hoped that Saddam would 'liberalize' and avoid war by cooperating with UN chemical and biological weapons inspectors. Saddam, being Saddam, wouldn't.

Iraq had been the petri-dish of Realist quick-fixes for two decades. None of them worked.

Since 2003, Iraq has endured one of the ugliest waves of disorder known to the modern era, but Iraq has surprisingly endured. Iraq has witnessed a bungled occupation, an insurgency, corruption unprecedented in its magnitude, sectarian and ethnic strife, the most barbaric and wide-ranging forms of terrorism, and an attempted return to autocracy (that of Maliki's—with the Obama administration turning a blind eye to it). After the Americans had left, Maliki beat up on Sunnis by invoking his brand of Shi'ite chauvinism, but the Sunnis turned to protest rather than arms. When he denied them the right to protest, Sunni jihadists came back in full force and managed, for the first time in a decade, to retake a major city like Fallouja.

Over the course of multiple national and local elections, the Iraqi people elected an underperforming, sometimes venal, political class that was no match for these manifold challenges. In the last two years alone, Iraq has further endured the loss of a third of its territory to the 'caliphate', the proliferation of Iran-backed Shiite militias, and what looks like the de facto secession of the Kurds. The country faces an imminent financial meltdown due to mismanagement of fiscal policy and the drop of oil prices. By any measure, Iraq is supposed to be dead, or near dead. Yet contrary to expectation, there is still a state there: children go to school, bureaucrats show up to work, shopkeepers sell their wares, oil is being sold on the international markets, and in fits and starts, the caliph's newly-won dominions are being reclaimed. The Kurds now face a reality in which their breakaway entity would have a difficult time staying fiscally afloat without their mandated share of Basra's oil. For all its venality and mediocrity, the political class managed to deny Maliki a third term, even though he had won a plurality of the vote.

Even more surprising is that the latest spasm of global protests are occurring in Baghdad, and have been for months. Why would anyone protest against a dead corpse? Doesn't protest entail the slightest of hope that the political class may reform itself? Where is this hope coming from?

Why would anyone protest at all if the nations of the Middle East had come around to Krastev's conclusion as well as that of the Realists, that the protests of the Arab Spring, the 'Twitter Revolutions,' had failed?

Can we completely rule out the idea that many Iraqis remain committed to the idea of Iraq? And what is this idea? Is their point of reference the 'stability' of Saddam's Iraq, or the 'instability' of the New Iraq?

I invite Mr. Krastev to study the latest protests of Tahrir Square in Baghdad. I promise he will find much in them by way of the juvenility that he detests about the 'Twitter Revolutions': anti-institutionalism, lack of practical vision, civic vigilantism, 'selfie' narcissism, borderline anarchism, and a general malaise of political myopia. They began when media celebrities put out a call through Facebook (where much of Iraqi conversation about general affairs occurs rather than on Twitter) to demonstrate over the lack of reliable electricity. Krastev will find the

humor in that as it echoes Bulgaria's own protests two years ago, which began over the spike in electrical bills. The liberal protestors sought patronage and protection from opposing militias. Some of these media celebrities work for institutions that are bankrolled by the most reviled oligarchs. The illusion of the internet's 'majority effect'—the echo chambers of Facebook—made them feel self-important, even messianic. Early on they called for the suspension of the constitution and the sacking of parliament. They mobilized because they thought parliamentary salaries were too high, neglecting to address the fate of the half trillion dollars of oil revenues that were frittered away, or stolen, over the last eight years. At one point, some carried pictures of Angela Merkel in appreciation of her open borders policy. At another, some unfurled a large Russian flag and paraded it around in admiration of Putin's intervention in Syria. They counted their numbers in the millions, but reasonable estimates set their peak at 50,000.

Back in 2011, many of the organizers had demonstrated too, but were met with Maliki's heavy handedness, and they melted away. This time around, the government facilitates and protects (in some ways, over-protects) their movement and right to protest.

Their favorite slogan initially was "the thieves have robbed us in the name of religion" meaning the Islamist parties, which unnecessarily provoked the conservative and religious segments of Iraqi society. The secular liberals had forgotten that mega-corruption began within the cabinet of the secular Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, who the Americans had left in charge and who was voted out when Islamists won at the polls. In the hysteria of the anti-elite ethos that had gripped many protesters, a liberal MP (one of only three) was ejected from their ranks, even though she had been a fixture of the 2011 demonstrations. A colleague of hers who had run on the same election slate but lost, a Communist Party leader, now counts as one of the leaders of the liberal pulpit of the protests.

As of late, they have been running out of steam, with fewer and fewer protesters showing up every passing Friday afternoon.

It would all seem so frivolous, and validating of Krastev's argument, had it not been for three outcomes: the protests terrified the political class, the protesters have leapt over identity politics, and they have adopted a word, *madaniyya*, to embody what they mean by reform, as well as their vision for the future. They may not be able to fully define what the word means, but the act of adopting it, and launching an open conversation about defining it within the contours of lowest common denominators, is a game changer.

A literal translation of *madaniyya* into English would render it close to 'civicism'; the Turkish word 'medeniyet' was used in Ottoman times and currently by modern Turks to mean 'civilization'. Neither definition captures what Iraqis are making of it. In fact, Iraqis are not quite sure what it means yet: it is a word in search of an ideology. But they are working on it.

Secular liberals would like it to mean 'secular liberalism' without having to use English terms for those concepts when speaking in Arabic. Sistani used *dawla madaniyya* ('a civicized state') two years ago to describe what he hopes the politicians would work for. He probably used it to mean good governance, rather than a secular and liberal form of government. Still, its use by highest Shi'ite religious authority the world over instead of 'Islamic government' or 'Vilayet el-Faqih' (Rule of the Jurisprudence, as Khomeini had established in similarly Shi'ite Iran) is very interesting. In Basra, the term found association with calls for turning the province into a federal region. Nativists can claim it to be an indigenous term: *madaniyya* is derived from the Arabic word for the 'city', and Iraqis are proud that the first cities of the world emerged in Mesopotamia.

At its core, *madaniyya* simply means cosmopolitanism, the ability of people from diverse identities and backgrounds to get along in close quarters. When those various unrelated bloodlines moved into the first Mesopotamian cities at the dawn of civilization, they had to manage the 'provocation' of a neighbor being different, in tongue, in dress, in faith, in skin color, not to mention opinion, and personal likability. They had to acknowledge difference, however provocative, and to live with it. This was the ethos of Gezi Park. It is an important way-station towards a maturing ideology.

For a country like Iraq that is riled by identity politics, where one can get killed for being of the wrong race or sect, arriving at such a way-station is monumental. Some do show up at the protests with slogans and banners that implicitly suggest identity politics, but the crowd drowns them out with shouts extolling *madanniya*, and the colors of the Iraqi flag overpower the scene.

Madaniyya no longer circulates solely among intellectuals or grand ayatollahs, one now hears it everywhere in Iraq. Many may not know what it means, but they still want it. The undefined term became synonymous with the protests, and the protests, even though small and chaotic, have transformed Iraqi politics. At first, the political class thought this was a revolution that would storm the Green Zone and drag its occupants through the streets—the politicians know that the protestors have good reason to be very angry. Sistani's representatives chimed in saying that the political class should listen to the people and enact reforms with "a steely fist". The reforms that have been enacted were bland, and the forces of Iraq's own status quo within the political class still seek to undermine them, but the protests go on, and Sistani keeps giving them succor. The latest incarnation of the many failures of the political class, the emptying of the state's coffers and its inability to pay public sector salaries, may give new impetus to the crowds, and draw in new droves of protestors.

I had set the location of Gezi Park as the rendezvous spot with an Iraqi friend who was staying at a hotel near it. This friend carried in his personal experience all the contradictions of revolution and the status quo. He was from a Shi'ite family, but had converted to Sunnism. His

brand of Sunnism was its most extreme: Salafist jihadism, which landed him in one of Saddam's prisons for most of the 1990s. He was an early enabler of Zarqawi's, when the latter had arrived in Baghdad from Afghanistan, even before the war. My revolutionary friend arranged for his band of Salafists to gather arms and ordinance, and rob banks, just as American tanks were rolling in. He plotted for revolution by coordinating with Salafist revolutionaries across the Middle East. He was hosted at times by Saudi princes, and traveled to Libya to raise funds for the revolution from Qaddafi. He only turned on Zarqawi because the latter had sought to dominate the Salafist revolution. Zarqawi ordered the killing of my friend's father and two brothers in reprisal. When Zarqawi's heirs attempted to establish a de facto caliphate in Iraq, my friend's Salafist mentors in Saudi Arabia instructed him to wage war on the Zarqawists. He was given free rein to work with the Americans and the Iraqi state in achieving victory.

It was difficult for me to accept his friendship. I suspect his brand of revolution may have been responsible in some manner for the deaths of many friends of mine. But there was something about him that was endearing. He seemed to have developed remorse about his past. He may have self-servingly turned against the Zarqawi revolution to save his own Salafist revolution, but in the process he began to see things differently. He tells me that all he does now is atone for those prior sins. I was interested in his own quest for redemption as a human. He still carries many contradictions: to him, the House of Saud is still the best possible ally against a resurgent Shi'ism. Even Erdogan, close as he is to the Muslim Brotherhood—whom the Salafists detest—is a good soldier-sultan for Sunnism as far as he is concerned. My friend had ceased to be a revolutionary, and was now in the service of the regional status quo.

So it was a privilege to see Gezi Park not only through my own eyes, but through his too. Oddly, he kept repeating a mantra: "this is not right. Turks (the protesters) shouldn't be doing this (against Erdogan)." I could sense that he was genuinely taken back by all the diversity there, the kind of diversity that is anathema to Salafism. I could sense too that he was surprised at himself for discovering that an intense array of diversity wasn't so bad after all. As the crowds began swelling for a confrontation with the police, he clambered atop a burnt car to get a better look. I took a picture of him in that instant: the one-time Salafist revolutionary standing above a revolution very different from his own.

These days, this friend of mine posts pictures of himself at the Baghdad protests. He has become a vocal proponent of *madaniyya*. How did the change come about? I'm not sure. But I am glad that it did. Could his transformation have happened had he not witnessed the protests in Gezi Park? Would I have been able to see the transformation come to light had it not been for the occasion of the Baghdad protests?

I saw his pictures on the same Facebook timeline along with pictures of another friend, a Shiite cleric in full clerical regalia standing among the protesters. This other friend was once a

Sadrist firebrand, and a rising leader of the movement. He was arrested by the Americans and imprisoned in Camp Bucca for three years. Camp Bucca was the same prison in which the current caliph of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was allegedly radicalized. However, my friend emerged from there as a liberal democrat. He kept his turban, but adopted a very different tone. When the protests came, he too adopted the term *madaniyya* as his rallying cry. Even his one-time leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, has recently hosted the leaders of the protests, including the Communist one.

I wish it were all a hopeful story. But it isn't. The liberal Shi'ite cleric felt threatened by Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias, and recently opted to become a political refugee in London to be just another statistic in the rolls of the Middle Eastern exodus to Europe.

These two gentlemen may represent outlier cases. But since they were no ordinary foot soldiers for their respective causes, their transformation is rendered extraordinary, and instructive. Instructive not just to Western audiences as a feel-good story, but rather instructive to thousands and thousands of young men and women who may be vulnerable to the call of extremism, as these two had been in their youth. I am sure that Kratsev, in his capacity as a political scientist, can see the utility of such individuals becoming leaders of the *madaniyya* movement. *Madaniyya* may be merely a brand at this point rather than a fully formed ideology. But it is a more merciful brand, and maybe a potent brand, against the available brands of jihadism. And if there is utility in that, wouldn't supporting it be a realistic endeavor, even if wasn't a Realist one?

Whether the once-Salafist revolutionary and the once-Sadrist one ever get to see *madaniyya* succeeding in Iraq is an open question. Whether Baghdad's Tahrir Square shall witness a firefight between the revolutionaries of the caliphate and the revolutionaries now led by Iranian general Qassim Suleimani is a possibility, a dark one. The believers in *madaniyya* may end up on rafts heading to Europe because their 'Big Idea' was no match for the forces of disorder. It is a heartbreaking prospect, as we saw in Paris, that the forces of disorder may chase them all the way there too.

It is also unfortunate that the HDP were sucked into the inflammatory rhetoric that Erdogan had reverted to on the 'Kurdish issue'. Demirtas in turn reverted to saying the kinds of things that were said five years ago, harking back to the PKK talking points of the past, and disillusioning many of the liberal Turks who pinned their hopes onto his transition into a national leader rather than an ethnic one.

But there's a fighting chance that Tahrir Square will be remembered as the birthplace of Iraq's *madaniyya*. This is what Bassem Youssef is talking about in the context of Egyptian youth, while the prospects of its 'fighting chance' are deemed too slim by Realists and Krastev. However, I'd rather have a little ray of hope than total darkness. This is not sentimentality; it is

strategy. We cannot fight the forces of darkness, in the absolute dark. The 'Big Idea' of *madaniyya* may just turn out to be a strategic advantage.

True-believing as strategy, not sentiment

It is dangerous to believe one's own propaganda, or so the saying goes. After my experience of watching the interplay of liberalism, the status quo, and jihadism, I had come to understand this line to mean that one can be a true-believer in the necessity of having a belief-system. This may sound cynical to some, but it is strategy borne out of necessity.

I am reminded of a vignette that I had read in Roy Mottahedeh's *Mantle of the Prophet* (1985). In it, a young Shi'ite seminarian in the Holy City of Qom is taken aback when an older religious authority tells him that there is no proof for the existence of God. The young seminarian was sure that the old mullah, famous for his piety, was trying to test him, to see if he was a secret skeptic. The older man went on:

When I discovered that there was no rational proof for the existence of God I tried to stop praying. I became ill; I couldn't eat and couldn't keep my balance. Then I discovered another way to believe. I pray, and you should pray. Most important of all, you should require the people around you to pray. Do you think that the people around you would leave anything in its proper place if they knew there was no life after this life? One puff and all order in society would blow away like a house of straw. You're a good boy and intelligent. You've studied *erfan* [Shi'ite mysticism] and have enough strength to hear what I just told you. Now go before other people arrive.

Societies need to be anchored in myth. The status quo in the Middle East began to crumble when those myths rotted away. Those myths ran the gamut from anti-colonialism to post-independence liberalism to socialism to Arab Nationalism to Turkish nationalism to puritanical Wahhabism to the Rule of the Jurisprudent, and on and on. Adventurists breathe new life into myths by lurching forwards; their actions, rather than maintaining the status quo, undermine it by inviting long-term instability. The old orders of the Middle East today are bereft of myths, leaving a vacuum of thought for the projects of zealous myth-making by the jihadists, both Sunni and Shiite.

As Krastev points out, the global 'Twitter Revolutions' share the trait of not knowing what myths should substitute the ones they are railing against. But the societies of the Middle East, where the protests began and resonated, cannot stop there because the alternative is no longer

as simple as a return to the status quo. The jihadist revolution is coming, and gaining ground. Those societies have neither the luxuries of time nor reticence as this threat looms.

There is ample evidence that the protests served to reintroduce political life into these societies. This atmosphere ignited a long dormant conversation about what comes next. They are still working out the answer, but in at least one case, that of Iraq's, they have figured out the working title: *madaniyya*. Meanwhile the West, after having given up on Iraq and the Twitter Revolutions, and again in the thrall of the Realists, is not paying it any attention.

Rather than brandishing a liberal teleology, as Krastev argues, even liberal-leaning Western policy makers have been squeamish about the advent of liberalism and democracy, judging these to be alien concepts to the Middle East. Their thinking is haunted by accusations of colonialism, neo-colonialism, 'Orientalism', 'White Man's Burden', and so on. Iraq is cited as the prime example of these concepts failing to take root in non-European soil. When one cites a non-European example where democracy succeeds, such as that of post-independence India's, the conversation turns specifically into one about the incompatibility of Arab Middle Eastern Muslim cultures with Western values. Krastev is correct in labeling Western thinking about the Arab Spring and Iraq a form of 'liberal narcissism,' but it only fits in the context of introspective navel gazing, one that feels that the West is guilty by default for assuming the primacy of its ideas, and not as Krastev argues by championing them.

Mesopotamia does not hold a copyright to the stories and ideas it crafted and exported to mankind. It does not charge a customs fee on its warehousing and re-exportation of Greek philosophy and culture from its libraries during Europe's Dark Ages. No one is expecting royalties from those inspired by the fatalistic tale of godly capriciousness and human resignation that is Gilgamesh's, which sounds a lot like the Realist line. George Lukas is not expected to share the proceeds of the Manichean-inspired *Star Wars* series with the provincial council of Babel, Iraq. That would be ridiculous. Likewise, there should be no Western patent on liberalism.

In that light, Western misgiving and angst over the adoption of such values by indigenous forces in the Middle East, by calling it *madaniyya* or by voting for the 'new' HDP, is an opportunity wasted. What may begin as a minority opinion may mature into a plurality, and sometimes pluralities turn into majorities through successive elections. When the West turns a blind eye to the machinations of the status quo in thwarting an organic political maturation as Erdogan did, these maturing values are denied a fighting chance. In a similar vein, one cannot ring the bell and call the bout over when forces such as the HDP are still in the game, and *madaniyya* is beginning to define itself. It is too early to draw the sheets over the 'Twitter Revolutions'.

Will we have to wait another seventy years, as Marx and Proudhon did, before their predictions of the collapse of the status quo by revolutionary fervor materialize? I don't think

so. The status quo in the Middle East, after having had a good run for the better part of the twentieth century, is already collapsing. Moreover, and here Krastev is wrong again, the moment those luminaries of thought put pen to paper to describe what had just happened in mid-nineteenth century Europe *was* the opening whistle of revolution.

We are living within an accelerated political cycle, feverishly catalyzed by the internet and by the challenge of revolutionary extremism. The rapidity by which narratives addressing the question of “What does it all mean?” coalesce and proliferate over social media is unprecedented in the human experience. The acceleration serves to spread revolution just at a time when a collapsing or enfeebled status quo fails to offer up counter-narratives.

We can only hope that emerging concepts, forged out of protest, such as that of *madaniyya* and the spirit of Gezi Park, can also have a fighting chance in the frenzied arena of ‘Big Ideas’. Here, hope is not a luxury. Hope is a weapon. Better that we face the jihadists with something, than nothing.

Krastev needs to further consider the possibility that the victory of such liberalized ideas in the Middle East may have an impact on Western thought: such a victory may make the Western protester (or even the Bulgarian one) more appreciative of the value of democracy. After all, didn’t this particular category of protester—who Krastev finds so maddening—draw inspiration from the Arab Spring to begin with? And as the West mobilizes in increments to address the jihadist threat, one that is lapping at its shores and eroding the walls of its liberal citadels, wouldn’t the Western world be well served by remembering what it is fighting for?

*