

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi

Egypt's next plague – chaos

What to make of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi's election as president of Egypt? What seems to be the most likely outcome is something analogous to the "constitutional settlements" of the early Roman Empire. That is, the military, like the Emperor Augustus in antiquity, will entrust to itself management of foreign policy, while granting Morsi (and a parliament, if new elections are allowed) – akin to the Senate in Rome – considerable autonomy with regards to the direction of domestic affairs, even as the military has assumed control over the drafting of the constitution.

Indeed, such a settlement would work well for the military, because, despite its extensive control of the economy, the burden of resolving the economic crisis would ultimately rest in Morsi's hands. Currently, as Reuters reports, the country's depleted foreign reserves can only cover "three months of import coverage," while the local currency debt has increased to 600 billion Egyptian pounds (\$99 billion), up from 500 billion before the unrest began in January 2011.

The International Monetary Fund has indicated that a \$3.2 billion loan will only be granted if the country gets its finances in order, but the prospects of such a resolution appear to be bleak. Having Morsi take responsibility, therefore, can prove useful in directing potential civilian anger away from the military. On the other hand, the perception of a settlement between the military and the president could help to attract foreign investment.

With the military managing foreign policy, the chances of a full-blown war between Egypt and Israel are slim, despite bellicose rhetoric emanating from some quarters of the Muslim Brotherhood calling for the liberation of Jerusalem and establishment of a "United Arab States." For one thing, Egypt lacks the means to launch and sustain a war against Israel. At the same time, however, one should not expect Egyptian firmness in dealing with rocket fire against the Jewish state or militant ac-

tivity in the Sinai Peninsula.

In fact, one could well see the military adopt an approach toward militancy not dissimilar to the methods of the Pakistani security forces: that is, targeting those perceived to pose a direct threat to Egypt's stability, while lacking resolve at best, and at worst playing a double game with other militants in order to continue receiving U.S. aid.

As for the domestic scene, it is probable that the Islamization trend that has been apparent over the past five or so decades will not only continue but could also accelerate. When the likes of Hosni Mubarak were in charge, the arrangement was such that Islamist ideology was allowed to disseminate at ground level. Now that Egypt has an elected Islamist president, it is to

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be expected that sentiments on the ground will only become more hard-line.

Although it is easy to dismiss outlandish claims that Morsi wants to reinstate the discriminatory jizya poll tax – essentially the equivalent of a Mafia protection racket – on Christians (the report is an uncorroborated rumor that can be traced to one obscure Arabic website), there is evidence that he would like to restrict the rights of non-Muslim minorities and women. Just under half of voters chose Ahmed Shafiq, but that will not act as a firm barrier against a gradualist approach to implementing Islamic law that many in the Brotherhood see as the ideal strategy to adopt.

In an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in the Atlantic magazine last year, Morsi made it clear that neither he nor the Brotherhood could tolerate the idea of a Chris-

tian or woman running for the presidency of Egypt.

While much has been made of a recent announcement by an advisor to Morsi that there are plans to appoint a Copt and a woman as vice-presidents, it should be appreciated that such positions are likely to be no more than symbolic. In fact, problems of discrimination against non-Muslims and women will in all likelihood only worsen under Morsi's presidency. Further, the spike in Salafist mob attacks on Coptic churches since the ousting of Mubarak – attacks usually sparked by the flimsiest rumors and trivialities – is unlikely to subside, and the authorities will probably continue to do nothing about it.

In the long run, chaos and instability are most likely to dominate the country's future. Unlike Iran, which has, since the mid-1980s, implemented a major family planning program that has dramatically slowed population growth, Egypt's population (83 million as of October 2011) continues to grow. It could reach 100 million by 2020, with more than 99 percent of the population living on an area of land around the Nile only 2.5 times the size of Israel.

Even assuming Egypt can escape from its current economic crisis, there is no sign its economy can keep up with the pace of population growth even to sustain present standards of living. The Muslim Brotherhood and other Egyptian Islamists have on past occasions denounced family planning as a Western conspiracy to keep the number of Muslims in the world in check. They have shown no intention of implementing a program to reduce the birth rate.

Egypt is unlikely to become a "Somalia on the Nile" as economist and columnist David P. Goldman has predicted, but in the long-term, internal stability is a remote possibility.

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James Kirchick

Paper trail leads to Damascus

In December 2010, the New York Times' Robert F. Worth wrote an article about the newspaper Al-Akhar, "the most dynamic and daring in Lebanon, and perhaps anywhere in the Arab world." The paper, whose offices evince "more of the feel of a college newspaper than a major daily," carries a "youthful energy and conviction." Worth favorably contrasted Al-Akhar's crusading spirit to what passes for journalism in much of the Middle East, a "region where the news media are still full of obsequious propaganda."

Lebanon has suffered civil war, sectarian violence, and was for many years a satrapy of its neighbor Syria. Surely then, given Worth's effusive praise, Al-Akhar is courageously standing up to the Levant's bullies, namely the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Baathist government of Syria, and their shared puppet army in Lebanon, Hezbollah?

Hardly. In an interview with Worth, Al-Akhar editorial chairman Ibrahim al-Amine described the paper's mission thusly: "We wanted the U.S. ambassador to wake up in the morning, read it and get upset." This attitude is encapsulated in the portrait of Imad Mughniyeh, the late Hezbollah intelligence chief, that Worth observed hanging in Amine's office. Mughniyeh, indicted in Argentina for the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy there, and complicit in countless other terrorist attacks, is "our Che," Amine told Worth.

Nothing has made Al-Akhar's authoritarian political sympathies clearer than its position on the Syrian uprising, which has now entered its 15th bloody month. The slaughter reached its height when the regime murdered over 80 women and children in the city of Houla a month ago, a massacre that belatedly led Western capitals to recall their ambassadors. President Bashar Assad has spared no cruelty in attempting to put down the rebellion. According to Radwan Ziadeh, a native Syrian and fellow at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, "The regime makes it a habit to arrest family members and hold them hostage in exchange for wanted persons." Honest Lebanese journalists, even some who sympathize with Hezbollah, have condemned Assad, who has demonstrated that he will stop at nothing to stay in power.

But not Al-Akhar. Sticking to its reactionary, faux-revolutionary politics, the paper has regularly delivered fulsome praise for Assad, portraying him as the last bulwark against Western imperialism. "Supporting Assad's struggle against this multi-pronged assault," Lebanese political analyst Amal Saad-Ghorayeb wrote in the paper on June 12, "is supporting Palestine today because Syria has become the new front line of the war between Empire and those resisting it." Last week Amine wrote an article

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entitled, "Things Assad Can Do," whose suggestions notably did not include, "Stop Killing People," but which did feature a defense of Bashar continuing his tenure as president. In April, another contributor published a long piece ridiculing Western journalists, including the wounded Sunday Times photographer Paul Conroy and his murdered colleague Marie Colvin, for their "feast at the trough of their own governments' narratives on All Things."

None of this should come as a surprise to anyone remotely familiar with Al-Akhar's politics, as Worth certainly was when he wrote his story just a year and a half ago. As a paper that "operates under the tacit protection of Hezbollah, Lebanon's most potent military force," there was little doubt that Al-Akhar would rise to the defense of Assad, who guarantees Hezbollah's power through money, intelligence and by allowing his territory to serve as a conduit for weapons from Iran. Rather than portray Al-Akhar as serving the interests of two powerful and ruthless regimes, however, Worth depicted it as an underdog whose product is "refreshingly free of the slavish headlines that are so common across the Middle East."

Worth lauded Al-Akhar for not having "a sectarian ax to grind," which is laughable considering that Assad's entire defense of his reign is predicated upon the sectarian argument that his minority Alawite clan can only survive if he remains firmly in power.

Like so many other Western journalists who venture to the Middle East, Worth was swayed by the rhetoric of "resistance" to supposed American and Zionist imperialism. "Our project is basically anti-imperialism," Khaled Saghih, the paper's "mild and cerebral managing editor," told Worth, who didn't appear to recognize the hypocrisy in such sentiments being expressed by a backer of a regime that occupied Lebanon for three decades. Likewise, Worth writes that the paper "champions gay rights, feminism and other leftist causes, even as it wholeheartedly supports Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shiite movement." A fair-minded reporter, and not a gullible stenographer, would have written more skeptically about a newspaper that claims to "champion gay rights" and "feminism" while serving as propaganda outlet for the Party of God.

At the end of his 2010 article, Worth recounted a conversation with Amine, in which the paper's editorial chairman reels off his "fondest hopes," a list culminating with the desire, in Worth's words, to "remove Israel from the map and send the Jews back to Europe – they would be more comfortable, after all, in a capitalist environment." This call for ethnic cleansing, replete with a medieval characterization of avaricious Jewry, did not faze the swooning New York Times scribe. Even Vogue, which published an infamous profile of Syria's first lady last year, was shamed into apologizing for its fawning coverage and went so far as to remove the article from its website. Perhaps now, some 15,000 dead Syrians later, Robert Worth will revise his original assessment.

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The system of religious marriage and divorce in Israel constitutes a commercial industry that sustains itself through exclusion, discrimination and commercialization of family life. The bureaucracy at its center is a misogynist and greedy arrangement that profits not only from marriages but also from the religious-status investigations, divorce proceedings, alimony hearings and custody battles under its jurisdiction. At its heart is a business model that keeps Jewish citizens a "captive audience." With marriage via other streams of Judaism being criminalized, the Rabbinat's monopoly over family life ensures it entrenched power and a healthy income. I propose that couples of all faiths, genders and status take back the authority over their union from a corrupt religious system and live as common-law spouses instead.

The economic rationale behind the religious control of the system of marriage and divorce is compelling, and the former is no less lucrative than the latter. Do not underestimate the religion industry's economic power, nor the role of economic considerations in the Rabbinat's decisions within marriage and divorce proceedings.

In many places around the world, there is no fee for registering a marriage. In Israel, not only does the couple pay for registration; they also bear a host of other bureaucratic costs. I estimate that marriage registration alone generates revenues of NIS 24 million every year. When the rabbi who performs the marriage ceremony requests an additional donation for his services, costs can

Irit Rosenblum

Time for a new marriage vow

rise by thousands of shekels.

An integral part of the Rabbinat's business model depends on religious-status investigations. The citizens of Israel should not have to pay an institution to verify the religious credentials of couples who request marriage licenses. The fact that the subject of the demeaning inquiry is also required to pay for it suggests that financial considerations are at play.

The system is structured so that a fee is paid for each procedure or document required. The longer the marriage registration, divorce, religious-status investigation or custody battle drags on, and the more procedures and documents that are required, the greater the rabbinical courts' income.

Fees paid to rabbinical courts for divorce proceedings fund a vast mechanism of officials, including administrators, clerks, judges, and scribes, and amount to NIS 15 to 20 million a year. The 120 state-employed rabbis in dozens of cities and neighborhoods in Israel earn salaries of up to NIS 30,000 a month. Nationwide, last year the state paid out NIS 342 million for their salaries, with another NIS 100 million paid by local authorities. In 2012, after a raise in rabbis' salaries, the religious services budget will reach NIS 1.1 billion, which comprises 0.4 percent of the state budget.

Such an astronomical investment could be justified if used to provide citizens with services that are necessary, equal and available to all. Yet the Rabbinat has proved to be a discriminatory, self-serving monopoly power that a cynic might suspect operates more for financial gain than religious conviction. In its current form, the rabbinical establishment and all it represents distances us greatly from the original values of Judaism.

Because marriages performed by individuals other than rabbis authorized by the Rabbinat are illegal, secular Jews and adherents of egalitarian streams of Judaism can't choose officiating rabbis who fit their belief system. Instead, they must choose between a religious marriage that contradicts their convictions, having a religious ceremony that answers their spiritual needs but is not recognized by law, or living as a common-law couple without a marriage certificate. That is a deep violation of religious freedom and human rights.

Ironically, many observant Jews don't even recognize the religious authority of the Rabbinat. A growing number of Haredim and modern Orthodox choose not to marry through the Rabbinat and hold independent marriage ceremonies conducted by rabbis from their own institutions. Perhaps this is



Eran Wolkowski

Julien Nocetti

The bear's grip falters

We should all be able to agree on a fact: Despite the growing international indignation toward it, Russia's position on Syria has remained remarkably consistent throughout the crisis there. By blocking passage of any resolution at the UN Security Council, Russia has gained both an international visibility and influence that go far beyond its means. And it is precisely this on which the Kremlin seeks to capitalize.

Russia has always sought to maintain a "two-headed eagle" position on Syria, behaving both as a part-time broker and as a suspicious spoiler. This has an obvious psychological – ideological? – dimension: Russian elites are obsessed with displaying their country's power to the Americans. It is essential for Moscow to establish the appearance of parity with Washington; Russia is thought to be powerful only if the United States perceives Moscow as such. That is why the Kremlin has little interest in achieving any diplomatic solution in Syria, with or without President Bashar Assad. For Moscow, the only tenable position is to preserve the status quo, thus tolerating ongoing violence while allowing Russia to leave other countries with the responsibility for taking risks – or not.

Two assessments can be made of Russia's Syrian policy. First, the West overestimated Moscow's leverage over the Syrian regime. Russia has not managed so far to weigh in decisively on the rebellion; what is clear is that it does not want Damascus to fall into the hands of the Syrian National Council. That, for Russian leaders, would be tantamount to coming under the influence of Turkey, or the Muslim Brotherhood and their sponsors in the Gulf monarchies. Likewise, Russia's material interests in Syria are real, though limited. Bilateral interests are supported by personal ties between Russian military officers and arms traders, on the one hand, and diplomats and senior officials from the Baathist regime, on the other.

Second, it shows how shortsighted Moscow's policy is in a region it has actively sought to return to for the past decade. In other words, Russia's support to Assad may have a broader and more serious impact on Moscow's relations with the West and the Arab Gulf monarchies than it does on Syria itself. Anti-Russian feelings are already palpable in some Middle Eastern capitals, including Cairo, Tripoli and Ankara.

Further tensions between Russia and the Muslim world, including within Russian society and its Muslim minority, might also be expected. But more essentially, since mass protests this past winter in the biggest Russian cities, President Vladimir Putin's regime is no longer seen as almighty at home. The country's foreign policy is therefore more vulnerable and more subject to criticism among the political elites and the media. The Kremlin's position no longer enjoys the support of a firm consensus within the elites, who are now exposed to the opinions expressed within the nascent protest movements and on the Internet. In today's Russia, domestic and external affairs are inextricably intertwined.

More fundamentally, the Syrian crisis has shed a harsh light on how Russian elites have trouble conceiving of the

Arab world. The Russians have subscribed to an idealized "parallel reality" in their perception of the Syrian regime. Moscow has undoubtedly proved somewhat naive toward Syria: Russian representatives feel they understand the Syrian political elites they interact with, whereas they do not comprehend the Syrian "deep state," with which they have contact only through a complex system of intermediaries. Very few Russian leaders actually monitor what is happening in Syria; they mostly rely on a classic situation of ignorance among their public: no parliamentary debates, few enlightened criticisms in the media, and a lack of independent expertise on Arab countries.

The latter point helps us to understand why the Russians failed in understanding Syria and, in a larger sense, the Middle East in its entire complexity. The Kremlin seems to be content believing the idea that recent developments in the region are the result of plots hatched overseas rather than a direct consequence of the toppled regimes' mass corruption and brutality.

Russian leaders and experts are persuaded that Middle Eastern societies are anti-American. They have always understood the Egyptian, Iraqi and Syrian regimes as bulwarks against terrorism – bulwarks that the U.S., in its zeal to spread democracy, would have heedlessly destroyed. When the Russians conceive of the Middle East, they first think about Central Asia, the Caucasus and Islamism. In other words, Russia must move beyond the influence of

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Orientalist and former foreign and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, and begin to consider the multiplicity of the current political and social processes in the Middle East while avoiding sweeping geopolitical considerations.

A month ago, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, at a joint press conference with his British counterpart, William Hague, said, regarding the possibility of a settlement in Syria: "This seems less like a tango and more like a disco where several dozens are taking part..." While relentlessly viewing its Syrian – and Middle Eastern – initiatives mainly in the light of its policy toward Washington, Russia looks increasingly unlikely to be part of a future post-Assad "dance" in the Middle East.

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because people of faith realize that Judaism is not the property of the Rabbinat but a tradition and system of belief that belongs to all. For people who seek a religious framework for family life, the Rabbinat is not integral. Judaism is.

I propose "privatizing" marriage in Israel, not in the capitalist sense of letting a corporation profit from government responsibilities, but by restoring civil liberties and privacy to the individual. Those Jews who choose religious marriage should be able to marry with a rabbi of any Jewish stream. Those who wish to subject themselves to the authority of the rabbinat can be free to do so. Those who wish to have a civil marriage – even to marry someone of a different faith – should be able to marry in Israel in a non-religious framework. And those who wish to remain independent of government or religious authority can choose common-law partnership, something that is recognized by Judaism. Thanks to amendments to over 20 Israeli laws, common-law couples enjoy virtual legal equality to legally married couples in nearly every sphere of life.

Common-law partnership makes the couple, and not the government or religious establishment, the authority in family life. It empowers individuals to take control over the most personal sphere of life by removing government or religious intervention in family life. Common-law partnership makes the couple the master of their own destiny.

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