

The Middle East Now, and Its Not Pretty Near Future

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For this post, I'm breaking a rule never to post anyone else's thoughts without commenting on them myself. So I've got to hand it to Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, who co-authored an article on the Middle East in the current New York Review of Books ([?This Is Not a Revolution?](#); Nov. 8, 2012). They have gotten me to break my rule. Agha, an Oxford academic and noted Track Two diplomat, and Malley, a Middle East analyst with the International Crisis Group, have given us, in general but non-sensationalist terms, the most accurate summary of the region and its near-future prospects that I can think of. Here are some short paragraphs from their well-informed article. They speak volumes.

?The Muslim Brothers yesterday dismissed by the West as dangerous extremists are now embraced and feted as sensible, businesslike pragmatists. The more traditionalist Salafis, once allergic to all forms of politics, are now eager to compete in elections. There are shadowy armed groups and militias of dubious allegiance and unknown benefactors as well as gangs, criminals, highwaymen, and kidnapers.

?Alliances are topsy-turvy, defy logic, are unfamiliar and shifting. Theocratic regimes back secularists; tyrannies promote democracy; the US forms partnerships with Islamists; Islamists support Western military intervention. Arab nationalists side with regimes they have long combated; liberals side with Islamists with whom they then come to blows. Saudi Arabia backs secularists against the Muslim Brothers and Salafis against secularists. The US is allied with Iraq, which is allied with Iran, which supports the Syrian regime, which the US hopes to help topple. The US is also allied with Qatar, which subsidizes Hamas, and with Saudi Arabia, which funds the Salafis who inspire jihadists who kill Americans wherever they can.?

?It's a game of musical chairs. In Egypt, Salafis play the part once played by the Muslim Brotherhood; the Brotherhood plays the part once played by the Mubarak regime. In Palestine, Islamic Jihad is the new Hamas, firing rockets to embarrass Gaza's rulers; Hamas, the new Fatah, claiming to be a resistance movement while clamping down on those who dare resist; Fatah, a version of the old Arab autocracies it once lambasted. How far off is the day when Salafis present themselves to the world as the preferable alternative to jihadists??

?The new system of alliances hinges on too many false assumptions and masks too many deep incongruities. It is not healthy because it cannot be real. Something is wrong. Something is unnatural. It cannot end well.?