



Opinions

Fulfilling the Arab Spring



By **Jackson Diehl** Deputy editorial page editor April 26 at 7:39 PM

If the Arab Spring had fulfilled its promise, Maikel Nabil Sanad would be part of a lively political culture in a rapidly modernizing Egypt. Instead, the 29-year-old [activist](#) — who was Egypt's first conscientious objector and is a pro-Israel atheist, to boot — is in Washington, appealing for political asylum.

Nabil has the scant comfort of being one of thousands: There were [more U.S. asylum applications](#) from Egyptians in 2013 than from any other nation except China. He is lucky that he is one of the Arab liberals who is merely in exile, rather than in prison or the grave. But he is also living testimony to what is missing from the ongoing struggle over the future of the Middle East, as well as the Obama administration's strategy for shaping it.

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It's easy now to forget that Arab proponents of democracy, market capitalism and rights for women were the instigators of the revolutions that swept Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and, ultimately, Syria after 2011. They did not come out of nowhere: For the previous decade, a movement had swelled in favor of ending what a [famous 2002 report by Arab intellectuals](#) called the region's "freedom deficit." In Egypt, its focal point, liberal newspapers and blogs sprouted like mushrooms and Facebook groups backing liberal causes attracted hundreds of thousands of followers.

Moreover, the liberals had a sensible agenda: To drag their countries away from the authoritarian nationalism of the 20th century — and the Islamism of the 7th — and adopt the successful development models of countries such as India and Indonesia, where hundreds of millions of Muslims prosper in 21st-century freedom.

That one country, Tunisia, [has succeeded in establishing a working democracy](#), despite power struggles between secularists and Islamists, and terrorism by jihadists, shows that the goal of democratic transformation was neither a pipe dream nor a Western imposition unsuited for Arab lands. It remains the only workable long-term solution for a region that must balance the interests of multiple religious sects and ethnic groups and find means to compete in global markets beyond oil and gas.

Four years after the revolution, however, democracy is the one option not being discussed as a way of ending the subsequent turmoil — in large part because liberals have been excluded from the debate. Tens of thousands have been driven into exile, including the leaders of Libya's first liberal government; many more are in prison, including [most of those who organized](#) the Jan. 25, 2011, march in Cairo that triggered the downfall of Egypt's rotting autocracy.

Some supporters of the liberal agenda, in Egypt and elsewhere, abandoned it when Islamists won Egypt's first democratic elections in 2012. But, as Nabil points out, most simply found themselves literally outgunned. "You had Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states backing the restoration of dictatorship in Egypt," he says. "You had Iran and Russia supporting the Assad regime in Syria, and money from the Gulf going to ISIS [an acronym for the Islamic State]. But no one backed the democratic forces — the United States and Europe decided not to take the risk of helping them."

President Obama denied aid to secular moderate rebels in Syria, declined to defend Libya's pro-Western democrats against rogue militias and backed Egypt's new military dictatorship even as it imprisoned the country's most committed and effective liberal leaders. Now he envisions political solutions to the wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen flowing from an "[equilibrium](#)" between Shiite Iran and the Sunni states. The United States would play the role of equalizer by moderating, through "engagement," Iran's hegemonic ambitions and by heaping new supplies of weapons on Saudi Arabia, Egypt and their allies.

Obama's scheme might be worth supporting if it had a chance of ending Syria's horrific bloodshed or saving a united Iraq. But as Nabil notes, that is the real pipe dream. Would Iran's supreme leader, or Saudi Arabia's king, really accept a new political order for Syria or Iraq not led by a client of their sect? Who will argue for the defense of minorities, women's rights or democratic choice at a conference table where the U.S. role is limited to balancing competing totalitarians?

A realistic U.S. strategy would start with the right long-term goal, which is putting the rest of the Middle East on the path that Tunisia is following toward building liberal institutions. It would then invest in the Arabs and Iranians who share that goal, of whom there are millions, and defend them from the despots who are tossing them in prison, dropping barrel bombs on their homes and forcing them into exile. It's not a policy that would pay off in the short run. But it would recognize that the best Mideast future lies with young people like Maikel Nabil Sanad.

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