

McClatchy-Tribune News Service
January 5, 2012

Radical Muslim power grabs in key Arab nations would be huge setback for U.S.
By LAWRENCE J. HAAS

WASHINGTON – At its best, U.S. policy toward the Middle East consists of a deft combination of short-term pragmatism and long-term idealism.

In the short term, Washington works to protect Israel and other U.S. allies, combat terrorism, rebuff Iran's hegemonic ambitions, and support regional stability, all of which ensures the continued flow of oil to power Western economies.

In the long run, Washington promotes the advance of freedom and democracy in the region and elsewhere to expand the circle of nations that share our values, reduce threats to U.S. national security, expand opportunity for hundreds of millions of people and create new markets for U.S. investment.

Unfortunately, the recent rise of Islamic movements in Egypt, Yemen, Libya and elsewhere threatens both our short- and long-run goals, generating profound new challenges for the United States.

These groups, which include the Muslim Brotherhood and Nour Party in Egypt and al-Qaida-inspired jihadists in Yemen and Libya, are anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, anti-women, anti-Western and, indeed, anti-modern. At their most extreme, they seek to restore the region and convert the world to 7th-century life during the time of the Prophet Mohammad.

To understand what they have in mind, consider recent Muslim Brotherhood-sponsored rallies in Egypt that featured calls to "one day kill all Jews," a wave of church bombings in nearby Nigeria by the group Boko Haram, whose motto is: "Western civilization is forbidden," and generalized violence against Christians across the region.

The ascendance of Islamic forces, whether at the ballot box or on the battlefield, raises serious questions about whether they would scrap such key building blocks of regional stability as the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty and create more safe havens in the region for anti-Western terrorists.

At the ballot box, in particular, experts fear that such groups will employ a "one man, one vote, one time" electoral strategy - secure political power legitimately and, with that power, then impose a strict and un-democratic Islamic law, known as "shariah," on their societies.

That would replace the dictatorships of old, some of which were U.S. allies like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak or contained by the West like Libya's Moammar Gadhafi, with equally intolerant but profoundly anti-Western theocracies.

The early returns are not encouraging.

In Egypt - historically the leading Arab state and the one from which others often take their signals - the Muslim Brotherhood won nearly 40 percent of the popular vote in recent parliamentary elections while the Nour Party that's affiliated with the more fundamentalist Salafis won almost 25 percent.

The Brotherhood's motto is "Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. The Quran is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope." The group wants to establish an Islamic state based on shariah and recognizes no right for Israel to exist or for Jews to live.

The Nour Party would go further, creating a society akin to what the Taliban had established in Afghanistan - with all forms of modernity rejected and women reduced to slave-like status.

On the battlefield, al-Qaida-inspired militants in Yemen are capitalizing on the demise of President Ali Abdullah Saleh to expand their presence. Likewise in Libya, al-Qaida has deployed jihadists to create another safe haven for its operations - now that Gadhafi is no longer around to contain such efforts.

Some U.S. foreign policy experts pine for the regional stability of pre-Arab Spring days and cast the emerging Middle East as a cautionary tale of what may ensue when dictators fall, leaving power vacuums for others to fill.

For Washington, however, the necessary path forward is not to eschew freedom and democracy but to double-down on them - that is, to better assist the truly democratic forces that launched the Arab Spring and that seek a freer Middle East over the long term.

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