If the Arab Spring Turns Ugly


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THE Arab Spring is a hopeful chapter in Middle Eastern politics, but the region’s history points to darker outcomes. There are no recent examples of extended power-sharing or peaceful transitions to democracy in the Arab world. When dictatorships crack, budding democracies are more than likely to be greeted by violence and paralysis. Sectarian divisions — the bane of many Middle Eastern societies — will then emerge, as competing groups settle old scores and vie for power.

Syria today stands at the edge of such an upheaval. The brutality of Bashar al-Assad’s regime is opening a dangerous fissure between the Alawite minority, which rules the country, and the majority Sunni population. After Mr. Assad’s butchery in the largely Sunni city of Hama on July 31, on the eve of the holy month of Ramadan, the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni group, accused the regime of conducting “a war of sectarian cleansing.” It is now clear that Mr. Assad’s strategy is to divide the opposition by stoking sectarian conflict.

Sunni extremists have reacted by attacking Alawite families and businesses, especially in towns near the Iraq border. The potential for a broader clash between Alawites and Sunnis is clear, and it would probably not be confined to Syria. Instead, it would carry a risk of setting off a regional dynamic that could overwhelm the hopeful narrative of the Arab Spring itself, replacing it with a much aggravated power struggle along sectarian lines.

That is because throughout the Middle East there is a strong undercurrent of simmering sectarian tension between Sunnis and Shiites, of whom the Alawites are a subset. Shiites and Sunnis live cheek by jowl in the long arc that stretches from Lebanon to Pakistan, and the region’s two main power brokers, Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, are already jousting for power.

So far this year, Shiite-Sunni tensions have been evident in countries from Bahrain to Syria. But put together, they could force the United States to rethink its response to the Arab Spring itself.

Sectarianism is an old wound in the Middle East. But the recent popular urge for democracy, national unity and dignity has opened it and made it feel fresh. This is because many of the Arab governments that now face the wrath of protesters are guilty of both suppressing individual rights and concentrating power in the hands of minorities.
The problem goes back to the colonial period, when European administrators manipulated religious and ethnic diversity to their advantage by giving minorities greater representation in colonial security forces and governments.

Arab states that emerged from colonialism promised unity under the banner of Arab nationalism. But as they turned into cynical dictatorships, failing at war and governance, they, too, entrenched sectarian biases. This scarred Arab society so deeply that the impulse for unity was often no match for the deep divisions of tribe, sect and ethnicity.

The struggle that matters most is the one between Sunnis and Shiites. The war in Iraq first unleashed the destructive potential of their competition for power, but the issue was not settled there. The Arab Spring has allowed it to resurface by weakening states that have long kept sectarian divisions in place, and brutally suppressed popular grievances. Today, Shiites clamor for greater rights in Lebanon, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, while Sunnis are restless in Iraq and Syria.

This time, each side will most likely be backed by a nervous regional power, eager to protect its interests. For the past three decades the Saudi monarchy, which sees itself as the guardian of Sunni Islam, has viewed Iran’s Shiite theocracy as its nemesis. Saudis have relied on the United States, Arab nationalism and Sunni identity to slow Iran’s rise, even to the point of supporting radical Sunni forces.

The Saudis suffered a major setback when control of Iraq passed from Sunnis to Shiites, but that made them more determined to reverse Shiite gains and rising Iranian influence. It was no surprise that Saudi Arabia was the first Arab state to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus earlier this month.

The imprint of this rivalry was evident in regional conflicts before the Arab Spring. Saudis saw Iran’s hand behind a rebellion among Yemen’s Houthi tribe — who are Zaydis, an offshoot of Shiism — that started in 2004. Iran blamed Arab financing for its own decade-long revolt by Sunni Baluchis along its southeastern border with Pakistan. And since 2005, when Shiite Hezbollah was implicated in the assassination of Rafik Hariri, a popular Sunni prime minister who was close to the Saudis, a wide rift has divided Lebanon’s Sunni and Shiite communities, and prompted Saudi fury against Hezbollah. The sectarian divide in Lebanon shows no sign of narrowing, and now the turmoil in Syria next door has brought Lebanon to a knife’s edge.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah’s audacious power grab has angered Saudi Arabia. Officials in Riyadh see the turn of events in Lebanon as yet another Iranian victory, and the realization of the dreaded “Shiite crescent” that King Abdullah of Jordan once warned against.

In March, fearing a snowball effect from the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia drew a clear red line in Bahrain, where a Shiite majority would have been empowered had pro-democracy protests succeeded in ousting the Sunni monarchy. The Saudis rallied the Persian Gulf monarchies to support the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain in brutally suppressing the
protests — and put Iran on notice that they were “ready to enter war with Iran and even with Iraq in defense of Bahrain.”

The Saudis are right to be worried about the outcome of sectarian fights in Lebanon and Bahrain, but in Syria it is Iran that stands to lose. Both sides understand that the final outcome will decide the pecking order in the region. Every struggle in this rivalry therefore matters, and every clash is pregnant with risk for regional stability.

The turn of events in Syria is particularly important, because Sunnis elsewhere see the Alawite government as the linchpin in the Shiite alliance of Iran and Hezbollah. The Alawite-Sunni clash there could quickly draw in both of the major players in the region and ignite a broader regional sectarian conflict among their local allies, from Lebanon to Iraq to the Persian Gulf and beyond.

The specter of protracted bloody clashes, assassinations and bombings, sectarian cleansing and refugee crises from Beirut to Manama, causing instability and feeding regional rivalry, could put an end to the hopeful Arab Spring. Radical voices on both sides would gain. In Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, it is already happening.

NONE of this will benefit democracy or American interests. But seeking to defuse sectarian tensions wherever they occur would help ensure regional stability. Even if Washington has little leverage and influence in Syria, we should nevertheless work closely with our allies who do. Turkey, which is a powerful neighbor, could still pressure the Assad government not to inflame sectarian tensions. And both Turkey and Saudi Arabia could use their influence to discourage the opposition from responding to President Assad’s provocations.

Beyond Syria, the two countries most at risk are Bahrain and Lebanon, and here we can have an impact. The United States should urge Bahrain’s monarchy to end its crackdown, start talking seriously with the opposition, and agree to meaningful power sharing. Washington has strong military ties with Bahrain and should use this leverage to argue for a peaceful resolution there.

In Lebanon, we should not encourage a sectarian showdown; instead we should support a solution to that country’s impasse that would include redistribution of power among Shiites, Sunnis and Christians. Lebanon last had a census in 1932, and its power structure has since favored Sunnis and Christians based on that count. Meaningful power-sharing in Beirut is as important to peace and stability in Lebanon as disarming Hezbollah.

The Middle East is in the midst of historic change. Washington can hope for a peaceful and democratic future, but we should guard against sectarian conflicts that, once in the open, would likely run their destructive course at great cost to the region and the world.