



Egypt Is No 1979 Iran

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In the wake of grass-roots protests that swept Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak from power, more than a few commentators have cautioned that the current political turmoil could end up bearing more than a passing resemblance to the events that led up to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Even that bleak outcome, however, might end up being wishful thinking. Ominously, the present situation in Egypt closely resembles the events leading up to Algeria's bloody 11-year civil war, which stretched from 1991 to 2002.

In October 1988, large demonstrations broke out throughout Algeria against the corrupt and authoritarian rule of the National Liberation Front (FLN), the secular party that had governed Algeria since its independence. As in the recent Egyptian demonstrations, the Algerian throngs included a large contingent of idealistic college students and people discontented with high unemployment and a government that seemingly was unresponsive to their economic woes. Yet, also as in Egypt, the demonstrations contained a significant Islamist element.

After initially unleashing the military against the protesters, causing hundreds of casualties, Algeria's president succumbed to the continuing protests and international pressure and allowed the establishment of opposition parties and planned for free and fair parliamentary elections. The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) quickly emerged as the main political victor, becoming the country's largest opposition party. As with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood today, it was difficult to gauge the FIS' radicalism. One FIS founder, Abbasi Madani, advocated democracy so long as it did not override Shariah (Islamic law), while another, Ali Belhadj, unequivocally denounced democracy altogether.

Algeria's military did not take any chances. In 1991, when the group won the first round of Algeria's first free election, the Algerian armed forces, fearing that the ambiguously Islamist FIS would end up creating a Salafist state, launched a coup, nullified the elections and arrested the group's leadership. In response, many FIS supporters formed or joined existing Islamist guerrilla groups, kicking off an internal conflict that ultimately would claim between 150,000 and 200,000 lives.

In much the same way, the Muslim Brotherhood today is positioned to seize power and is sending mixed signals about its outlook. On the one hand, the Fifteen Principles for Agreement prominently displayed on the Brotherhood's website endorse freedom of opinion, the press and assembly. On the other, the Brotherhood's 2007 draft party platform, still viable, advocates barring women and Coptic Christians - a religious minority making up 10 percent of Egypt's population - from becoming president. It also calls for establishing a clerical council tasked with ensuring that all legislation and governmental decisions are Shariah-compliant. More telling still, the Brotherhood's incumbent "supreme guide," Mohamed Badie, asserts that the "improvement and change that the [Muslim] nation seeks can only be attained through jihad and sacrifice and by raising a jihadi generation that pursues death just as the enemies pursue life."

These mixed signals might prompt the Egyptian military to emulate the Algerian approach - particularly if the Brotherhood, Egypt's largest and best-organized opposition party, wins the upcoming parliamentary elections. The Brotherhood's Feb. 12 announcement that it would not seek the presidency or a parliamentary majority may have been a signal that it fears just such a military crackdown.

However, if the Brotherhood reneges on its promise, it could open the floodgates for Islamist violence. As was the case in Algeria, there are pre-existing militant Islamist groups that Egyptians - incensed by any military interference in the electoral process - could join. Throughout the 1990s, two groups, Gamaa Islamiyya and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, fought brutal insurgencies against the Egyptian state. The former formally renounced violence in 2003; the latter was absorbed into al Qaeda in the mid-1990s. Although largely dormant now, both are believed to have maintained some of their organizational infrastructure and could become players in Egypt once again in a revolutionary situation. The primary difference between Algeria and Egypt is that Algeria has more guerrilla-friendly terrain, with large mountain ranges where Islamists can hide. Egypt's Islamists, if they do launch an irregular war, would be largely restricted to urban warfare.

While it is unquestionable that the Egyptian military top brass finds the Muslim Brotherhood abhorrent, what is less clear is whether the same Egyptian military that refused to disperse the large anti-regime rallies of the past month would have the stomach to fight and win a civil war against the Muslim Brotherhood's supporters - a campaign that, by its nature, would entail human rights abuses much more severe than those perpetrated by the Mubarak regime. If they do, the Obama administration should prepare for the possibility of a replay of Algeria's civil war along the Nile.

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