Two and a half years ago, the Arab Spring erupted across the Middle East. In some countries, the people deposed their single-party governments in an attempt to bring about democracy. In others, the government prevented such takeovers. In Syria, the people’s protests degenerated into civil war. Furthermore, it seems that every week, the media reveal new atrocities committed in the region. Syrian forces gas innocent civilians. The Egyptian military shoots hundreds of peaceful protesters. Tunisian gunmen murder politicians. Iraqi Sunnis attack Shiites during religious observances.

It is not surprising that the American public has little appetite for confronting Syrian President Assad. Many Americans think that the Middle East is suffering from insanity. “They just keep fighting each other.”

The people of the Middle East are not insane; they are suffering from too many societal transformations happening at once. The three major ones shaping events are: reformation, enlightenment and liberty. These three terms take their meaning from Western history.

The Protestant reformation began in the 16th century with Martin Luther, John Calvin and others leading theological revolts against the dominant religious organization, the Catholic Church. As Protestantism spread among the people, including the monarchies and rulers, violent clashes led to nearly 150 years of war between different nations, as well as civil wars and persecutions of religious groups within nations.

It was, in part, the enlightenment movement that began in the 17th century that provided a way out of this morass. It championed the belief that humans could govern themselves, both individually and collectively, and not be ruled by one set of divine dictates or another. This led to tolerance among religious groups and to democracy. The latter led to revolutions (e.g., America) and civil wars (e.g., France) in which the people strove for liberty, violently replacing rule by tyrants with democratic governance.

These three movements largely took place sequentially, but they led to such incessant fighting that an outside observer would have said, “They just keep fighting each other.”

In today’s Middle East, all three movements are happening at the same time. The enlightenment arrived in the 19th century, with the advent of Western imperialism. It brought science and technology, most obviously in the form of military weapons, but also in health care, education and manufacturing.

The modernity brought by Western enlightenment helped create, in Middle Eastern countries, a secular section of society by largely going around Islam. Islam was irrelevant to technology and, so, was not part of the transformation.

The Muslim equivalent of the reformation began only in the 20th century, with Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. They took the notion that humans should govern themselves and produced theologies in which individual Muslims were seen as responsible for the relationship of themselves and their societies to Allah, a concept surprisingly like Martin Luther’s idea that individual humans are directly responsible to God and not through the Church.

So today’s Islamist movements, from radical to civil, are the Muslim equivalent of the Protestant groups of the 16th century. They are trying to establish a new divine order of society in opposition to its current organization. The main difference is that, instead of struggling against societies dominated by a religious body (e.g., the Catholic Church), they have been fighting against societies ruled by secular, single-party tyrants.

The Arab Spring, however, was not brought about by the Islamists, but by the secular wing of society in Middle East countries. Their fight has been for liberty, whether from secular tyrants or from religious leaders pushing divinely ordained rule. Given that the tyrants suppressed the formation of political parties for decades, the only other organized groups in these societies are religious ones.

In Egypt, for example, this has led first to the creation of a democratic state, in which the Muslim Brotherhood was the only group that could act enough like a political party to win a majority of the nation’s votes. When its elected leaders took steps to introduce their religious beliefs into the state, however, the secularists saw their liberty being hijacked. They turned away from democracy and called upon the remaining institutions of the tyrannical state, the army and the judiciary, to overthrow them.

In other words, the secular section of society created from enlightenment principles turned to tyranny to overturn a democratically elected government -- democracy, of course, being an enlightenment concept.

So, we in the Western world should not be surprised at the ongoing difficulties in the Middle East, which will probably last for decades. They stem from three major social transformations happening at the same time. In our own culture, these three transformations took centuries to process, and much of that processing happened through violent means. We cannot expect Middle Eastern cultures to do it better than we did.

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