

## **Embracing Autocracy in the Middle East**

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, political science, and culture.

Today's topic is Embracing Autocracy in the Middle East.

Our speaker today is Robert Kaplan who just released a new book entitled *The Loom of Time: Between Empire and Anarchy*, from the Mediterranean to China.

I am a huge fan of Robert Kaplan's ideas and have read a dozen of his books that delve into the politics of the developing world in places like the Balkans, the Middle East, and Asia.

Kaplan makes the case for realism as a foreign policy approach in the greater Middle East and with our ongoing power struggle with the Chinese.

Let's now begin this podcast with Robert Kaplan.

Robert D. Kaplan:

I'm Robert D. Kaplan and my latest book is *The Loom of Time Between Empire and Anarchy from the Mediterranean to China*. The loom of time was a phrase that the great British historian Arnold Toynbee used in a reference to Penelope, Odysseus's wife in the *Odyssey*, who was weaving on her loom every day and every night waiting for her husband Odysseus to come back. And every night she undid the pattern that she made because she didn't want to finish her weaving because then she would have to marry someone other than Odysseus. So, she worked on the loom all day, and she undid the knots during the night. Odysseus returns and they live again happily ever after.

The point of Toynbee's analysis is that progress is made. You're moving towards a better conclusion, but it's just not straight and linear and is not obvious at the time. That's how I see the Greater Middle East. Everywhere from Greece to Western China, including the whole Middle East: Turkey, Iran, and the Arab world. My point is that the idea that the Arab Spring failed and therefore the Middle East is doomed to autocracy is not right. That's linear thinking. The loom of time shows that changes are happening. The Middle East is hurdling forward. Progress will be made.

Then there's the subtitle of the book between Empire and Anarchy. Notice, I don't say between democracy and authoritarianism. The Washington crowd are obsessed with democracy and authoritarianism, but this is not how people in the Middle East see it.

This is a book of reporting and travel writing. I interview many dozens of people over nine years. Very few people talk about democracy or autocracy. What people in the Middle East fear is anarchy. It's not authoritarian per se that transfixes them. It's the record of empire. And by empire I don't just mean the British and the French between the two world wars.

It's not the West; it's empire from the Umayyads in the seventh century in Syria, the Abbasids afterwards, the Fatimids, and then 400 years of Ottoman Turkish rule from Algeria to Iraq. The Middle East has always been governed by empire since the seventh century. Empires that stretched more or less from the Atlantic to Mesopotamia. And because it's a history of empire, states could not develop on their own. And because they could not develop and mature, it's that much more difficult to erect a democracy in the Middle East.

Western intellectuals don't give much thought to anarchy because it's an abstraction to them. They've never experienced being at roadblocks where they're held up by soldiers with their safeties on their assault rifles off. They've never experienced looting crowds or gunfights in the street. But people across the greater Middle East have vivid experiences of this in their lifetimes or their parents' lifetimes, and they fear it. So that's the oscillation in my book between empire on one extreme and anarchy on the other. And the goal is how to find a happy medium in between. It might be democratic, it may not be, but the goal is a happy interregnum. A position between two extremes.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to open with the Odyssey. You discussed Penelope. I want to discuss Odysseus's behavior. In my freshman year English class in high school, we read the Odyssey and I wrote my paper about Odysseus not taking responsibility for his actions. He's a no-show for 25 years. He goes on adventures, meets lots of interesting and beautiful women along the way. His ongoing absence is the back story of why Penelope is untying her daily knots. But Odysseus has agency as well. How should we think about these Greater Middle Eastern countries, their populations, and economic and political lives and their agency as a metaphor?

Robert D. Kaplan:

Yes, Odysseus has agency and he's partly to blame, but that's not what concerned Toynbee. The loom of time, the cycles of history are never linear, which can be convoluted full of zigs and zags. In all these countries, they have agency. One of the themes of the book is that they're held responsible for their own situations.

When people say to me that I'm downplaying democracy, give me one example of one Middle Eastern country between Morocco and Pakistan that has had either a successful democracy or has even a partially successful experience and nobody can name any.

The most recent failure is Sudan, where the Biden administration worked like cats and dogs to arrange agreements between civilian civil society actors. And the result was two gangs of officers fighting it out. It has led to the breakdown of the whole country. These civil society intellectuals are nowhere to be seen or heard at the moment.

Tunisia's 10-year experiment with democracy ends with autocracy. So, all these countries have agency, the question is why has their agency failed? Or why has their agency not led to at least one or two or three successful democratic experiments? What I'm concerned with the book is the legacy of empire, which is one of the factors. The other could be the legacy of Islam, a system of worship that when applied in Indonesia or other places in the non-Arab world is only a system of worship. Whereas in the Arab world, it's not just worship, it's the whole way of organizing the societies based on Islamic principles.

That's very utopian and that has led to different arguments about what form of Islam to use, how extreme it should be and that in turn has led to a lot of disagreements and instability.

Larry Bernstein:

Israel is a democracy that prospers in the anarchic greater Middle East. Its neighbors are all threatening. Many of the Jews in Israel immigrated from anarchic places like North Africa, the Arab countries, the former Soviet Union, and post-holocaust Europe.

Robert D. Kaplan:

Israel's democracy is 75 years. 75 years is a long time and nobody should be romantic about democracy. It's highly imperfect because most people agree that the particular system of apportioning seats in the Knesset is not working. It gives too much power to small parties and this has led to instability and infighting and weak governments with razor-thin majorities. Nevertheless, Israel is a democracy and that's why I don't include it in this book.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is Saudi Arabia. Tell us about the 2030 Vision project and their successful development without democracy.

Robert D. Kaplan:

I call it a success because I define it differently than the media. The media defines it by some white elephant projects that have more money poured into them than common sense.

Vision 2030 is a direction; it's a grand strategy able to be tweaked and slowed or sped up depending upon the circumstances. It's a vague grand strategy.

It conceptually unifies the many different things the regime is doing. For instance, Vision 2030 is about getting Saudi Arabia beyond the oil and gas age to a point where the Saudis can have a dynamic prosperous country, but to do that, they have to be very entrepreneurial and technocratic and efficient.

How do you do that? You have to liberate 50% of your population, the women, and that means allowing them to work, allowing them to dress as they want, allowing them to become managing directors of companies, because guess what, if you can liberate 50% of the population, you radically change the behavior of the other 50%.

And what's interesting in Saudi offices you see many aggressive women running the place. This all is very ordinary, but it's not ordinary compared to Saudi Arabia up until 2017 or so. It's very radical and this is one aspect of Vision 2030 of how you get to an entrepreneurial society from a society that was lazy and essentially hired the foreigners to do everything for them.

You stabilize your relationship with Israel to try to get some investment from their high-tech digitized society. You take Israel as a combatant off-the-table. All these things, the Crown Prince, MBS, Mohamed bin Salman, he's trying something that's very hard to do, which is change the culture of a country.

Changing the culture of a country is not really what politics is about. Politics is about working with the culture of the country. The number of times that countries have changed their cultures in a short period of time, like 10 or 20 years, are rare. The Meiji restoration in Japan, Ataturk's Revolution in Turkey after World War I, the Zionist Revolution in Israel in the 20th century. The Saudis are trying this. That's their goal to change the culture of the country and that is really the root of vision 2030 and that doesn't make it into media reports.

Larry Bernstein:

This summer I traveled to Istanbul. I hadn't been there since 1990, and it is very different. The last time I was there, the population of Istanbul was 5 million. It's now 15 million. It's the largest city in Europe, not London, Paris or Berlin; It is Istanbul. The city is vibrant. Its museums are completely new with superb exhibits that highlight the success of the Ottoman Empire.

How do you think about the rise of modern Turkey. Samuel Huntington in his famous book *The Clash of Civilizations* predicted that Turkey would turn away from Europe and instead try to re-establish its ties with the Arab World with the hope of regaining its empire and regional leadership status. What do you think about Turkey and its relative prosperity and growth?

Robert D. Kaplan:

Yes, my general impressions of Turkey were very similar to yours. All we read in the paper is about how Erdogan is a dictator and he's stolen democracy from Turkey. That's true but that's only superficial. The country itself is so dynamic, so postmodern in terms of hotels, bridges, infrastructure. Turkey is extremely modern and even all the towns and cities in the heart of Anatolia, far from Europeanized Istanbul, are economically vibrant.

This was explained to me by a Turkish analyst, she called Turkey a standalone power. What she meant was that Turkey is too big, too important to be just another garden variety member of NATO like Belgium or Holland. It's not going to fit neatly inside the Western alliance anymore, and that has a lot to do, not only with Erdogan's particular political direction but also with the nature of the country itself. 85 million highly educated people across a vast landscape bordering Europe, Eurasia, and close to the Middle East and Africa.

Erdogan has made it like Tito's Yugoslavia. If you go back to the Cold War, Tito left the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Empire in 1948 because he felt that Yugoslavia was too big, too important, too sprawling, to fit neatly inside the Soviet Empire. It remained a communist country, but it became one of the founders of the non-aligned movement during the Cold War. And that's how I see Turkey now. Turkey will be a standalone power. It'll balance between NATO and the West, between Russia and the Middle East and will be very transactional with all of these countries.

Larry Bernstein:

I left Istanbul and I went to visit the country of Georgia. I went there because a very close friend of mine was having his 50th birthday party there. We visited a lovely vineyard on the Chechnyan border. The Caucasus mountains separate these two countries, and I was reminded of some of your work on the importance of geography. Chechnya and Georgia couldn't be more different. They touch on the map, but they don't touch on earth because of those mountains. Tell me about how geography separates different civilizations.

Robert D. Kaplan:

I know what you mean exactly. You could make the same point between India and China. They touch on the map, but between them is the high wall of the Himalayas with the ridge of that wall being the border. There are no populations that see or have anything to do with each other.

Chechnya is part of the Northern Caucasus. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are part of what's called the Transcaucasus or the Southern Caucasus. The mountains are steep enough so that places developed separately so that the North Caucasus are part of the Russian Empire, and the South Caucasus are all independent countries angling to become closer to the West.

Now, Putin may exert influence and pressure upon Georgia and Armenia, but it's not the same as being actually part of the Russian Federation, which is the North Caucasus because of this mountain range. Geography is crucial.

Taiwan is a hundred miles from the mainland of China. If it were 20 miles, which is the width of the English Channel, the mainlanders would've conquered Taiwan back in the 1950s. It's a question of geography. The United States has the largest internal river system in the world, and that's why it was able to develop an internal economy of scale during the 19th century.

If you go to Tunisia even, which is one of the most unified Middle East countries with the fewest geographical divides, you still find the population along the Mediterranean far more Westernized and liberal than the population on the plateau or in the highlands in the center, which is much more conservative and Islamic.

Egypt can have military regimes, it can experiment with democracy, but Egypt will always be a state because it exists along the Nile and is easy to be controlled from a central point. India can be democratic because its river system divides the country rather than unites it, and there is no uniting force across the subcontinent so that it's not friendly to autocracy.

I write about the territorial illogic of Iraq and Syria, how their vague geographical expressions rather than age old clusters of civilization.

Tunisia and Egypt are age old clusters of civilization. In between is Libya a vast nothing, which was never unified except weakly under the Italians. The moment that the dictator whose harsh rule was the only thing holding the place together was toppled, Libya disintegrated into anarchy. Tunisia and Egypt can have had their problems since the Arab Spring, but they're essentially cohesive states. Order is resolved. The question then becomes how to make order itself less and less tyrannical, but Libya can even can't even come up with an answer to the basic question of order.

Larry Bernstein:

In 1996, I was business partners with Mark Franklin at Salomon Brothers and we started a proprietary trading department that focused on investing in emerging markets. Mark was very experienced in these markets, and he told me that the best way to evaluate the business and political risks was literally to walk the emerging markets. He called this the shoe leather approach to studying the emerging markets. We were not going to sit in our ivory tower learning from experts about these economies but would instead go travel to Russia, Indonesia, Argentina, and Morocco. It's imperative to meet local people, learn about their cultures, and evaluate investments by kicking the tires. Tell me about your experience as a political analyst and journalist and how you apply the shoe leather approach to your business.

Robert D. Kaplan:

You don't write about a place that you haven't been to. And when you go to a place, you get out of the capital city. You do your interviews in the capital, you meet a lot of people, but you take a train or a bus and you get away because that's enormously educational. You can find out how much control the government actually has outside of the capital. Are there police? Do the trains run on time and is there an organizational structure far away from the capital that actually governs? Because in many parts of the developing world, once you leave the capital, you leave government. And when you leave government, anything can happen. Militias can be in control; private armies can be in control. You learn things that don't fit within the strictures of hard news writing. Are the taxi drivers honest? Is it safe to walk the streets at night? It's all these mundane little details that educate you about how a country actually functions, if it functions, which somehow you don't get in foreign policy journals, which are concerned much more with abstract political science issues but which are far from the whole story.

Larry Bernstein:

When I was walking around in Istanbul, I felt very safe. There were a lot of people out and about including women and children. In 1998, my wife and I lived in Japan and Tokyo was incredibly safe for a large urban city and the society was free and democratic. Is Istanbul safe because it is authoritarian or is because it has a successful civil society?

Robert D. Kaplan:

Turkey was safe before its authoritarian system. Turkey has had a democracy since the 1930s and even when you had weak semi-anarchic democratic governments of the 1970s, the streets were safe. In Turkey, it's a very cohesive family-oriented culture. That's why the authoritarian extent of Erdogan's rule is so unnecessary. This could be a much more vibrant, productive country. It doesn't require the current leadership to keep the place safe and together.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is Tunisia. This is the country where the Arab Spring began. What is going on there?

Robert D. Kaplan:

Tunisia is the most likely place in the Arab world to have a functioning democracy. It has no sectarian splits, no ethnic splits, no big mountain ranges dividing the country, good roads you can get to most places, physically close to Europe. A lot of European investment democracy came to Tunisia in the Arab Spring in 2011.

Over the years, Tunisia became less and less safe. Not so much in the capital, but in a lot of the smaller cities around the country. And that was part of the reason why Tunisia is now not a

democracy. It's what you'd call a weak authoritarian system. It may oscillate back towards democracy, but things which had worked well were no longer working.

Larry Bernstein:

For those listeners who do not know the history of modern Tunisia. Ben Ali was the President of Tunisia for 24 years. A local fruit merchant could not get his occupational license properly renewed and committed suicide by self-immolation. The government crumbled after rioting began. This authoritarian leader lasted nearly a quarter of a century but his hold on power was a thin veneer. There was such hope in Tunisia for a democratic revolution, can you expand on why the country slipped back into authoritarianism?

Robert D. Kaplan:

That's because Tunisia got its independence from France without the need of a civil war or a war against France like Algeria. And it was run in the first three and a half decades, by Habib Bourguiba, who is the Atatürk of the Arab World. Stable rule, not overly oppressive, a very secular form of patriotism, a big literacy program for rural women which got the birth rate down dramatically, enlightened policies like that. Tunisia at that time was very stable and was very robust. What happened was that Bourguiba got old and became less and less effective and was replaced by a number of people who were mediocre.

And then we had Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who he was the former interior minister and he was a security heavy. He greatly enlarged the middle class, which you have to give them credit for, but guess what? And this is a challenge for China and other places. Middle classes are notoriously ungrateful. They don't hold up signs and say, thank you for making us middle class. No, once you have a middle-class trending society, which Tunisia became, the population has all these new demands and grievances and hopes and dreams, and they're harder to govern. As Tunisia became harder and harder to govern, Ben Ali also got older and older and more set in his ways and more corrupt. And so, the regime became a thin veneer and got to the point where, as you said, Larry, it was easily toppled.

Larry Bernstein:

Samuel Huntington wrote a book entitled Political Order in a Changing Society. And in the book, he makes the point that you're making, which is that the new middle class wants a seat at the political table. They deserve to have some power that represents its interests related to their economic success. And so, when the unrest in Tunis begins with a disgruntled fruit merchant peddler, the middle class was unwilling to support the regime and assisted in toppling it. It's not that they're ungrateful, it's that they had political expectations that were not met.



Robert D. Kaplan:

Yeah. There's an Arabic word that I quote in the book called Karama. It means dignity. People in the Middle East, they're not legalistic. They don't want Western democracy. They don't want an election every four years. They're not going to risk their lives for something like that, but they want dignity. They want a regime that will not insult them, that will give them a hope of stability and development and allow them to live their lives and have their freedoms. It might be democratic; it might not.

Where in the Middle East is there this social contract? It's in the Arabian Gulf and it's helped a lot by oil and gas, you have basically a social contract between ruler and ruled. The regime gives its people stable governance, enlightened, bureaucratically efficient governance, and predictable changes of successions when a leader dies.

As the Saudi told me, "We watched the Arab Spring, we saw failures either quickly or over time in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya." And then he said, "look at us. We've had the same ruling family for a hundred years. We've had about six or seven changes of leadership in success, all of them went peacefully. All of them were concluded within 24 hours. Once the king was assassinated that was King Faisal. In 1975, the family got together and they chose a new leader, and within 24 hours, Khalid became king and he became a moderate, predictable leader. And once they had an incompetent ruler, King Saud and the family removed him in the 1960s because he wasn't up to the job, and they installed King Faisal who went on to become a very good statesman.

The Saudi's point was we've delivered a hundred years of stability under essentially moderate conservative governance. Now we have a dynamic leader. Who are you to give us lectures about what kind of regime we should have?

Larry Bernstein:

Khashoggi, a Saudi dissident journalist was killed by government agents in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. What were the consequences of this homicide?

Robert D. Kaplan:

If you're going to do that to an influential columnist for the Washington Post, one of the two leading newspapers in the United States, you're going to suffer the hatred of the Washington elite for years to come. It's like when the Iranians took several hundred American diplomats' hostage in 1979, they incurred the hatred of the whole US Foreign Service for a generation. The repercussions were vast and they're still felt. It's taken the Biden administration almost three years to come to a normal understanding with Saudi Arabia, despite the fact that even though the Saudi Arabian regime is highly repressive for reasons of state and national interest, we require a

close working relationship with it because they have been the world's swing producer of hydrocarbons.

It's inexplicable because Mohammed bin Salman, any time people come to him with a problem, he often says see what the experts have to say before I have to make a decision. It seemed out of character. Though there may be some things we don't know about it. He's clearly paid the price because he could have started out in January 2021, with a good working relationship with President Biden. However, it's now August 2023, and it's only now that that relationship has come back to normal.

The Saudis expected this killing of Jamal Khashoggi to make relations with the U.S. very difficult for about a year or so, but when it went on for two years, the Saudis became angry.

Larry Bernstein:

As the US-Saudi relationship has come under stress during the Biden Administration, the Saudi relationship with China has blossomed. What is going on there?

Robert D. Kaplan:

When I was in Riyadh, I heard time and again, people say to me, the Chinese, they buy our oil. They're our biggest trading partner, and guess what? They don't give us moral lectures on human rights and democracy. Another phrase I heard was, we're oppressed by the Iranians with their aggressive imperial foreign policy in the Middle East, and we're also oppressed by America exporting its values. So, this is what's going on in the mindset of the Saudis.

Larry Bernstein:

How is America's street cred in the Middle East after our withdrawal from Afghanistan and Obama's decision not to do anything after Syria crossed that red line?

Robert D. Kaplan:

President Biden has given about a hundred billion dollars in military aid to Ukraine so far. America has clearly won back its credibility because it's weakened another great power tremendously. Putin is less able to project power in Central Asia and the Russian Far East. The prospects for the Russian Empire are much weaker now than they were a year and a half ago, and that's largely because the Biden administration has decided to put all this money and expense in sending weapons. I think that wins back American credibility to a significant extent, even in the Middle East, which is not part of the European theater we're talking about, but it's close by. It's been the biggest demonstration of American military and economic capacity in a positive sense that we've seen since the first Gulf War of 1991.

Larry Bernstein:

Robert you were an advocate for the War in Iraq. What did you get wrong?

Robert D. Kaplan:

What really affected me was the fact that up until that point, my analysis and my ability to see things ahead of the curve was pretty good. This time, it totally failed me. Iraq was not an abstraction for me. As I detail in *The Loom of Time*, I experienced Iraq under the asphyxiating tyranny of Saddam Hussein, and I also vividly experienced street level Iraq under the worst phase of the anarchy after he was overthrown. That's why I took it so hard.

Larry Bernstein:

You spoke at my book club in New York 15 years ago about your book *Imperial Grunts: On the Ground with the American Military*. You were embedded with the army and you saw first-hand how the military employed deadly force and was working simultaneously to sway hearts and minds. Do you still think that our military is effective in changing local attitudes in favor of the US?

Robert D. Kaplan:

It actually happens quite frequently in smaller deployments. The smaller the deployment, military training missions, things like that, which don't make it into the news, but which are the bread and butter of America's military deployments. They do affect people, but it's like foreign aid to small villages and people in the next village don't know about it. So, you can win hearts and minds in a village, but it has no effect over the whole country because there's no way of communicating what happened in one place to another place. It's not a very efficient use of the military.

Larry Bernstein:

There was a recent coup in Niger. What is going on there?

Robert D. Kaplan:

I've been writing for decades that democracy is very hard and that the Biden administration has just assumed too much in Niger. There was this assumption that because the president was democratically elected and was a friend of the West that meant that Niger had an organizational, bureaucratic, democratic system in place, and that was clearly not the case. They had held an election or two and it went off well. But then once there was a falling out between the elected president and the chief of his armed guard, there was a coup.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode with the note of optimism. Robert, what are you optimistic about?

Robert D. Kaplan:

The Loom of Time, the fact that progress can be made towards more liberal societies, whether it's Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, wherever, except that it's not going to occur in a linear direction according to a Western script.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Robert for joining us.

If you missed last week's show, check it out. The podcast was Moderate or Neuter the Supreme Court! Our speaker was Aaron Tang who is a law professor at UC Davis. He wrote a new book entitled Supreme Hubris: How Overconfidence is Destroying the Court and How We Can Fix It.

Aaron argued that the Supreme Court to be humbler in its rule making and do the least harm instead of trying to solve society's most difficult problems. Otherwise, if the majority of the court remains proactive, he proposed that we should either pack the court or strip the court of its power.

I now want to make a plug for next week's podcast with Paula Marantz Cohen who is the Dean of the Honors College at Drexel University. The topic will be her new book Talking Cure: An Essay on the Civilizing Power of Conversation.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website [whathappensnextin6minutes.com](http://whathappensnextin6minutes.com). Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining me, good-bye.