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BY THE TIME HE STEPPED DOWN as Secretary of State in January 1977, following Jimmy Carter’s presidential inauguration, Kissinger had redrawn the map of the Middle East. Following a war that threatened to unleash years of armed conflict between the Arab states and Israel—and escalate to possible superpower intervention—Kissinger created a framework for peace among powerful governments in the region. He negotiated military disengagement near the Egyptian-Israeli border, the return of Israel-occupied territory on the Sinai Peninsula, and a commitment to basic cooperation between the two states, with the United States as trusted mediator.

Speaking “from the heart” to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations upon his leaving office, Kissinger explained: “I thought it was important for the future of Israel and for the future of the Jewish people that the actions that the United States government took were not seen to be the result of a special, personal relationship...but the basic national interests of the United States, transcending the accident of who might be in office at any particular period...The support for a free and democratic Israel in the Middle East is a moral necessity of our period to be pursued by every administration, and with a claim to the support of all freedom-loving people all over the world...Throughout their history, Jews have been saying to themselves: ‘Next year in Jerusalem.’ I would like to think that sometime soon *we* can say this in its deepest sense—in an Israel that is secure, that is accepted, that is at peace.”

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THE GEOPOLITICAL STABILITY that prevented another war with Jordan, Egypt, and Syria masked deep domestic discontent in these and other Middle East nations. Kissinger’s beliefs—of peace in the Middle East deriving not from justice or democracy, but from state-centered stability, and of basic freedoms ensuing not from popular consensus but from strong leadership—had the effect of reinforcing dictatorships. Among those seeking freedom, his policies cast the U.S. as the preeminent sponsor of iron-fisted, authoritarian leaders such as Sadat, his successor Hosni Mubarak, the Shah of Iran, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, and Saddam Hussein. While cooperating with Washington, these dictators brutalized their own populations. Kissinger was aware of the democratic shortcomings of his policies, but took little heed of the anger, resentment, and desire for political change among ordinary Arab citizens. For him, statesmanship required tolerating brutality as a bulwark against even greater suffering that would result from a breakdown of law and order. He believed that Washington

had to work closely with unsavory regimes to prevent the region from immolating itself in a fire of mass hatred. Moreover, increased democracy in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia would only heighten the chances of war with Israel. Antisemitism and other hatreds had popular appeal, and violence was a simple and attractive option for angry citizens. Was it not better to work with figures like Sadat, a dictator who also used his power to repress popular calls for war? Was it not better to acquiesce in Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza than to allow those lands to become a base for renewed attacks on the Jewish state? Sustainable, rational, political stability in the region had to be built before other far-reaching reforms and democratization could be pursued.

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AS THE “ARAB SPRING” ERUPTED in December 2010, the pillars of Kissinger’s Middle East policy began to crumble. An April 10, 2011 *Washington Post* essay Kissinger co-authored with former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker commented on the promise and the peril of the spreading revolt: “The Arab Spring has the potential to become a great opportunity for the people of the region and the world. Over time, fostering democracy may provide an alternative to Islamic extremism; it may also, in the short term, empower some of its supporters. We need to develop a realistic concept of what is achievable and in what timeframe.” A “realistic concept,” according to the authors, requires “long-term stability in the Arabian/Persian Gulf” and “seeing that countries in the region do not become breeding grounds for Islamic extremists.”

Kissinger and Baker warned that rapid democratization without strong, authoritative leadership to guide the way is dangerous because it can create a cycle of violence and extremism as new groups seek to fill a power vacuum after the overthrow of a long-serving dictator. “We need some assurance,” Kissinger and Baker wrote, “that a succession would not create its own major problems; therefore, it is important to have a concept of order after regime change. The last thing the region needs is a series of failed states.”

Kissinger is correct to warn about the rise of more “failed states” in the Middle East, but his policies have contributed to this very outcome in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and perhaps Saudi Arabia as well. Focused on order and stability, Kissinger and his successors in Washington failed to push effectively for the reforms and increased political participation demanded by the repressed citizens of these regimes. Kissinger promised that democratization would accompany order, but in the Arab regimes that Washington bankrolled, it never did. American policies gave the dictators who resisted democracy more—not less—power.

