

## **Essays**

### **Authoritarianism, Civil Society and Democracy in the Middle East**

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The published literature on the topic of “Authoritarianism, Civil Society, and Democracy in the Middle East” is extensive and unwieldy. Partly due to space constraints, we propose to review the topic under six framing questions and then provide a selected and representative bibliography at the end.

#### **1. Why Are So Many Middle Eastern Regimes Resistant to Reform?**

The ideas of political reform and democracy are often the mainstay of debates within Middle Eastern polities. In general, there is ample awareness of democracy deficit and poor governance in the region. Democracy refers most basically to the ability of citizens to hold their governments accountable, and to change their political leaders at regular intervals. Instead, accountability to the public is generally weak in the region, and rulers are more likely to change as a result of actuarial realities than a withdrawal of public confidence.

It has often been argued that as income and other measures of well-being increase, the chances for democracy grow. In the aggregate, per capita income in the Middle East is considerably higher than either East Asia, or Africa, yet both regions have shown much more democratization than the Middle East. The Arab middle class varies widely in size but in many countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Algeria, it is quite large. The presence of a large middle class is often instrumental for democracy because the middle class has the means and the incentives to protect its interests against government encroachment, as well as the ability to articulate political demands. However, since the government sector is often massive, a large percentage of the middle class is comprised by salaried employees who may be reluctant to challenge the hand that feeds them (Bellin 2002, 2004).

At least some of the reasons for absence of sustained reform and democratic development in the Middle East can also be found in the region’s past history and its larger political, economic, and social environment. The extent and frequency of Middle Eastern domestic and international conflicts have in fact increased in the past two decades. Internally, the problems stem from the fact that the prevailing authoritarian regimes have accumulated a record of very limited public accountability, poor economic performance, constricted space for credible opposition movements to emerge, and an enormous diversion of funds to pay for arms and armies.

From the external perspective, the roots of some of the Middle East’s problems can be traced back to crises associated with its emergence from nineteenth and twentieth century Western colonialism and from other forms of outside domination following the Second

World War. International forces, actors, and groups have historically played important roles in the politics of the region. The vast oil and gas resources of the Middle East and its vital role in the economy of the industrialized world have transformed the region into a center of great economic importance to the outside world. This indigenous wealth has had the unintended consequence of exacerbating both political and economic problems of the Middle East. One can only speculate about the economic potential of the Middle East if serious conflicts, such as the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian dispute, were resolved. The Middle East has also diverted enormous sums of money to sustain war economies.

The idea of democracy did not originate in the Islamic world, yet the notion that Muslims are unwilling to embrace democracy for deeply seated cultural reasons simply does not stand up, whether the focus is on Muslims in general, or Arab Muslims in particular. Given the opportunity to play by democratic rules, Muslims have been quite adept at forming political parties, interest groups and building effective coalitions (Norton 1995-1996). To discover whether Muslims embrace democracy one learns less by examining non-democratic settings than by considering democratic contexts. While there is no question that some Muslims are hostile to democracy in principle because they argue that law is the word of God and not made by the pens of men and women, nonetheless, many pious Muslims do embrace democracy as wholly consistent with their religion and we need to look at factors other than religion to grapple with the weakness of democracy in the Middle East.

The most persuasive explanation for the absence of sustained economic and political reform and the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East can be found in the political economy of the contemporary state. The common wisdom is that the answer lies in the direct access of political leaders to subsidies and rents that facilitate authoritarian control (Luciani 1994). As Crystal (1994) has explained, Middle Eastern states (and especially the rentier states) have routinely used the power of the state to control resources, dominate the economy, and promote a non-reform oriented and state-dependent bourgeoisie; they have further used systematic repression as the dominant and preferred tool of the state against critics and dissidents; they have also manipulated socio-structural diversity to control various groups' attempts at political participation; and finally, various ideological appeals (from Arab nationalism to socialism to Islamism) have been used to rationalize repression and to sustain authoritarian control. In short, Middle Eastern governments use their resources to put civil society in a straitjacket and to defer demands for change.

Middle Eastern political reform also needs to come to terms with cultural issues that often dominate the discourse of politics. Even though structural issues and especially the political economy of the state help explain Middle Eastern politics, there are cultural factors that are also relevant to the region's democracy deficit. These factors have become deeply affected by the onslaught of globalization that has bombarded the region with information, western popular culture, fast food and movies, and contributed to the dislocation of deep-seated economic relationships. The impact has been particularly severe on societies' traditional foundations and has challenged many deeply-rooted values.

The regional response to these developments has taken several different forms. Some of these efforts can be constructive especially if they help the progressive evolution of Islamic modernism. Since Islam has never been a static civilization, and has had a rich tradition of modernism, a successful fusion of Islam and modernity can remove the cultural edge

from the interaction of the Middle East with the West. In the Islamic modernism arena, two specific and contentious issues will stand out. The first concerns modifications of certain Islamic practices, especially in personal status laws and the criminal code that is detrimental to gender equality. The success of this process will go a long way to reduce some of the more pronounced cultural tensions and animosities that have pitted tradition-bound Muslims against the West. Even if these laws are not formally removed from the books, their gradual erosion (and non-adherence to them in practice) will help transform the situation.

The second issue involves central themes of governance, people's sovereignty, and democracy. Although Islam is frequently cited to explain politics in the Middle East, as though religion is transmitted from generation to generation with a fixed collection of views on questions like democracy and freedom, the fact remains that there is a remarkable diversity of views within Muslim societies about the scope of the good life, the role of people in politics and the merits and demerits of democracy. In particular, the compatibility of Islam and democracy is emphasized by several noted Muslim modernist thinkers such as Iran's Mohsen Kadivar, Egypt's Muhammad Salim al'Awa and Syria's Muhammad Shahrour (Baktiari and Norton 2005). Since these intellectuals and their followers remain faithful to the essential precepts of Islam, their potential impact can be significant. But Islam has also been politicized in the hands of some Islamist movements that claim to have "the" answer and a monopoly on the Truth. Some but not all of these groups are hostile to democracy and democracy's basic premises and to the idea that men and women are sovereign and can make laws. Instead, they argue, the only legitimate law is God's law and the only sovereignty belongs to God. Clearly such a rigid conception of governance is antithetical of democracy.

## **2. Does Inclusion Promote Moderation and Pragmatism?**

The question of whether political inclusion promotes moderation invites two initial related responses. One is that it depends on the structural constraints present in the political system and the other is that excluding people from political decisions provides a classic argument for changing the political system (recall: "no taxation without political representation"). By structural constraints, we refer to the electoral rules, the constitutional framework and especially the independence of the judiciary, the power of countervailing political actors, and the influence of regional or international actors. In some instances, such as Lebanon, the complex confessional political system is a major constraint on power accumulation.

What is exceptional about the inclusion-moderation question is that it seems to divert little public attention unless the focus is the Muslim world. In contrast, the conclusion that bringing people into the political system tends to undermine extremism is taken as rather obvious in many other parts of the world (Przeworski 1991). In Italy, for instance, Robert Putnam and his colleagues reported in *Making Democracy Work* (1994) that political radicals brought into the system tend to move toward the ideological center. In an otherwise much discussed book that particular conclusion was seldom, if ever, challenged.

The proposition that bringing Islamist politicians into the political system is even a sensible thing to do is often challenged by an array of observers, and self-interested players who wield power or enjoy access to those who do. Scholars have gone through great (and sometimes successful) contortions to argue against Islamist participation in politics. One example is a scholar with little apparent experience in the Arab world, who argues that Egypt "can stand in for other Middle Eastern countries," then offers a reductionist argument to conclude that the Muslim Brothers are avowed revolutionaries who bear an ominous

resemblance to the Nazis (Berman 2003). The result is that one learns more about the author's anxieties than either the origins or the momentum for change. The distortion may not be immediately apparent because regional specialists are sometimes cited to validate perspectives that do not appear in their work. Most striking is a tendency to view the salient Islamic values as a de facto threat, as well as to ascribe the broad transformation of Egyptian society to a particular organization, specifically the Muslim Brothers. Thankfully, more nuanced and empirically grounded assessments of the variety of evolving Islamist perspectives on competitive elections, debates over key questions like political toleration and citizenship provide reliable resources. (Abed-Kotob 1995, Baker 2003, Burgat 2003, Campagna 1996, Kodmani 2005, al-Sayyid 1991 and Wickham 2003).

One of the first rhetorical bullets in the chamber of skeptics is almost always a quip from a speech by a distinguished US diplomat that Islamists favor a system of "one vote, one man, one time" (Djerejian 1992). The immediate reference was the Algerian coup d'etat in which "le pouvoir" stepped in to prevent the Islamic Salvation Front from taking power via elections, and in the process provoked a civil war. The obvious point that bears repeating is that it is at least an open question how FIS would have behaved in power and that FIS would have provoked a civil war if it attempted to impose an Islamist constitutional order on Algeria which has as fiercely a secular population as an Arab population, not to mention a secularly-oriented army. The fact is that "one man, one vote, one time" has been applied in various regional settings at various times—Palestine under occupation, Bahrain, and Tunisia come to mind—but the forces closing the door on participation were hardly Islamists. In fact, Islamist parties have more typically played by the rules of the game, when given the opportunity (Piscatori 2000). With structural constraints in place they have shown a penchant for repeated participation (Salamé, ed. 1994).

The real problem, of course, is not really one man, one vote, one time; that is a red herring. The problem is that opposition politicians, Islamist or otherwise, will play by the rules, but that they also will espouse policies that undermine the privileges or interests of those in power and the external powers that support them. Thus, while he was Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East during the Clinton administration, Martin Indyk told a group of scholars and government officials that he did not endorse political reform in the Arab world at all because it would lead to the inclusion of Islamists who, in his view, would be hostile to the "peace process" and to Israel and anti-women (after September 11, 2001 he changed his position dramatically on political reform, although not on Islamists) (Indyk 2002). The objections that Indyk raised were not insubstantial, but given the apparent strength of the Islamist oppositional groups across much of the Middle East it is pertinent to consider whether it is patently possible to imagine any serious project of political reform that denies Islamist groups a hand in the game.

Surveying the cases—Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, Morocco and, of course, Palestine—the conclusion that shouts at the observer is that the cases are all so different. Where there are meaningful structural constraints (often in the form of durable and robust institutions) inclusion and moderation make good music; but where the constraints are stunted or in tatters, a violent cacophony may erupt. Not surprisingly, the least successful experiments in inclusion have been in Iraq, where the US led invasion attempted to impose a two-aspirin at bedtime model of democratic transformation on a

wrecked country, and in Palestine, where decades of “de-development” under occupation have destroyed much of any conventional political artifacts (Roy 1997, Patten 2003).

In the latter two cases in particular, what is notable by its absence is a respect for the citizen. When political competition occurs in a political system with well-developed respect for the rights of citizens, which is to say a state where citizenship is undergirded by a structure of law and institutions that uphold citizenship, then any experiment in inclusion is likely to prove less precarious and more likely to succeed.

### **3. What Are the Impediments to Citizen Rights?**

Equality of rights and privileges is critical to a democratic society and the Middle East cannot be an exception to this reality. As T. H. Marshall's classic treatment of the subject states, citizenship has three basic components of civil, political, and social (Marshall 1950). Civil citizenship is the quest for individual rights such as liberty, freedom of speech, and equality before the law. Political citizenship is the quest for access to the decision-making process and those institutions and laws (election/suffrage) that allow for its success. Social citizenship is the quest for economic welfare, security, and educational attainment.

The notion of citizenship and its practice in the Muslim world is important for several reasons. First, the current ideas of citizenship are largely new to the Islamic world and are essentially borrowed from the West in the past century. Prior to the nineteenth century, the relevant concerns were individuals' and groups' duties and obligations in the social system as defined and codified in Islamic law. Specific rights of citizens, and the necessity of their protection by the state, were not the dominant concerns. To this day, both the Islamic and the larger Third World grapple with the inherent tensions between citizens' rights before the state and their duties and obligations to the state. Second, any discussion of citizenship relates to how the state responds to collective demands for protection of rights and accountability in governance. Third, the topic allows for exploration of several key institutions that are in the forefronts in protecting and advancing the rights of citizens in autocratic states. These include state institutions such as the judiciary and civil society associations such as human rights activists, lawyers groups, and the like. Ultimately citizenship is about the boundary of a political community and who is or is not a member and with what rights and privileges.

In the Middle East, a significant problem is that citizenship rights can be conditional and even withdrawn. Of particular relevance there are three major groups—women, ethnic and religious minorities—whose basic citizenship rights are structurally constrained and restricted in practice. Additionally, there are serious problems with the avowed ideology and exclusionary practice of certain Islamist groups. The extremist elements even extend their exclusion to recognized monotheistic religious minorities. This form of exclusion can even extend to Muslims, rulers and otherwise, who do not fully share the Islamists' view on the organization of the polity. It is difficult to envisage a democratic Middle East without gender equality of power and significant progress on equality of rights for ethnic and religious minorities. Although the relationship between Islam and citizenship is highly complex and at times problematic, there are rays of hope. This is evident in the writings of some of the Islamic modernists who have attempted to reconcile Islamic and Western conceptions of citizenship while being faithful to Islamic heritage. It remains to be seen as to whether a more universalistic conception of citizenship can emerge from these endeavors and, if so, whether it will be accepted by regimes and masses alike.

#### **4. Does the Arab-Israeli Conflict Impede Political Reform?**

It is a familiar mantra to diplomats, journalists and scholars of the Middle East that the Arab-Israeli conflict is at the core of the region's problems. The implicit claim seems to be that if one solves that conflict a Gordian knot of underdevelopment, autocracy and thwarted freedom will unravel. The claim is easily falsifiable both at the level of inter-state relations and internal challenges: Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, civil wars in Yemen and Algeria, the national quest of the Kurds, rebellion in Oman, Libyan-Egyptian border tensions are pertinent examples of state levels of conflicts that have little, if anything at all, to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict. We have already noted a variety of fundamental questions at the level of the individual, the content of citizenship for example, that are indirectly—at most—connected to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Even so, we underline that the unsettled plight of the dispossessed Palestinians is integrally connected to the dilemmas facing several of the region's states, not least Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt. The Arab-Israeli conflict impedes political reform in those states, and others, in at least three significant respects: by justifying the thriving national security state, by undermining the prospects for transnational regional cooperation and by buttressing international support for authoritarian denizens of stability.

The conflict rationalizes the national security state syndrome, including the militarization of politics, the quashing of political opposition in the name of security and the skewing of state budgets to enable the fiscal engorgement of the military (Ayubi 1991, Crystal 1994, Hudson 1977, al-Naqeeb 1990).

Although it is easily forgotten in the retrograde conditions of the early Twenty-first century, but not so long ago, when hope was afoot in the Middle East, there was an illustrative moment of nascent transnational cooperation. We are pointing to the mid-1990s, before the promise of the Oslo peace process was derailed by the assassination of an Israeli prime minister and by the rise of Israeli, Palestinian and US forces bent on thwarting a reasonable settlement of Israeli and Palestinian claims. For a moment in time it was unexceptional to sit in the same room with Saudis, Syrians, Israelis, Palestinians and Iraqis to discuss issues of shared concern (e.g., water or economic development) in search of mutually-beneficial solutions. The utter impracticality of such talks today—perhaps even without Israelis—is tragic, especially given the plethora of problems facing the region's societies (UNDP 2002).

Finally, and we will come back to this point in the final section, from the standpoint of the United States support for a given Muslim government often turns upon that government's stance in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Given the widely negative critique of US policy in the Arab-Israeli conflict found not just in the Middle East but in much of the world, the prospect of an opposition group—Islamist or otherwise—winning both popular support and US support is pretty slim. The present Bush administration flirted with a cold turkey cure but stability is still a popular drug of choice in Washington, especially in the politically delicate matter of protecting Israel's interests. This need not be so, but the precondition is a significantly less skewed policy approach especially to Israeli and Palestinian aspirations and concerns.

#### **5. Do Middle Easterners Want Democracy?**

It is commonly assumed that most citizens of the Middle East do in fact yearn for good governance, accountability, and values associated with political reform and inclusionary

politics. Needless to say, there are individuals and groups that do not share this perspective. The latter groups' ideas of democracy promote a perspective that enshrines a faith-based version of democracy with strong exclusionary elements. As far as the general population is concerned, the evidence is reasonably strong that democracy as a value is much praised and admired even though its practice has been partial at best.

The published results of several different international polling organizations seem to reaffirm consistently the above observation. Many of the polls conducted by scholars further reinforce this view. As importantly, several major studies of American public diplomacy in the Muslim world have come to similar conclusions. The similarity here is remarkable since these studies have been done both at the behest of the US government and non-governmental organizations. Clearly the horrible tragedy of 9/11 has increased the urgency of the matter as those involved in the act were Arab Muslims. The question that looms large is what nourishes and sustains terrorism and other highly undemocratic behavior in the region. Although there is no simple answer, it is clear that a host of reasons from authoritarianism at home, unequal distribution of wealth, the enduring Arab-Israeli conflict, and the sometimes provocative policies and actions of great powers, especially the United States, all significantly contribute to terrorism.

In the various public diplomacy studies, particularly the Congressionally-mandated "Djerijian Commission" report, dramatically negative attitudes toward the United States led Ambassador Edward Djerijian to conclude that "the floor had fallen out" of support for the US, especially in the Middle East (US 2003). These developments emanate, at least partly, from a serious failure of both foreign policy and public diplomacy in the Muslim world. As this and other reports indicate, negative attitudes toward the US are based on at least three major issues: perception of unfair and one-sided policies regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict; US support of authoritarian regimes in the region; and the debacle in Iraq. The recent Israel-Lebanon crisis no doubt reinforced these views. The combination of these factors has given the extremist Islamists an open field to recruit and pursue violent anti-American policies.

The irony in this matter is the fact that there are critical American values and achievements that are admired in the region. These include the American values associated with democracy, openness, and the ability to succeed in conflict resolution. Moreover, achievements and successes in higher education, science and technology, and cultural products are also noted. What irks the Middle Easterners is America's vanishing credibility and the apparent dichotomy between our values and our policies in the region.

## **6. What Is the Impact of US Policies of Reform and Democratization in the Middle East?**

While US administrations have frequently extolled the abstract virtues of democracy for all of humankind, most have done very little to promote it in the Middle East, most especially in the Arab world. As recently as the 1990s, the project of political reform was not only spurned but actively resisted by leading officials in the Clinton administration. In our own experience, attempts to promote an agenda of reform during that period were met with hostility and suspicion. Readers hardly need to be reminded that arguably the dominant narrative about the terrorist attacks of September 11 emphasizes that al-Qa'ida is a manifestation of the pathological lack of opportunity in the Arab world and the absence

of freedom. Putting aside the problematical components of the narrative, the fact remains that the administration of President George W. Bush embraced reform and democratization as a cure to al-Qa'idaism.

Credit is due to Bush for actually sparking lively and serious debate in the Middle East about themes of political reform and democracy. While the domestic underpinnings of Lebanon's "Cedar revolution," Egypt's "Kefaya" or Morocco's relatively lively political party life are strikingly domestic, to choose three obvious examples, there is little doubt that pronouncements from the Rose Garden had the effect of opening up political space—for an interlude at least.

Granted, it was a short romance, given the wreckage in Iraq, the vindictive US reaction to the election of Hamas in Palestine, the summer war in Lebanon and the rediscovery of Egypt as a key ally despite its façade democracy. We recognize that the US infatuation with reform and democracy may have been highly opportunistic, but our point here is to distinguish between the more patient prognoses of scholars and the radical, even impetuous transformations envisaged by recent US policy in tragic settings such as Iraq (Przeworski 1991, Norton ed. 1995, 1996, Brynen et al. 1995).

The patent unwillingness of the US government to accept the outcome of elections when it does not much like the victors predictably inspires charges of hypocrisy and double standards. At the highest reaches of the US government, the failure to read correctly the strength of the Islamist impulse is stunning (in Egypt, for instance). This was especially the case in Palestine, where the US pressed for elections even against the contrary urging of Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian authority. Bush apparently thought, as a former aide reports, "that democratization would even facilitate a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by shaping a Palestinian leadership more focused on internal governance (i.e., providing services such as collecting garbage) and less "hung up" on final status issues like territory, settlements, and Jerusalem (Leverett 2006, p. 29). The suggestion that elected officials, Islamist or not, would become so busy that they would neglect, even forget the fundamental issues that shapes their society's ethos is extraordinary. We would argue that the importance of inclusion is not that religious activists or others must face mundane chores if elected. Instead, the point is that it means debating how the theories inherent in an ethos may actually be applied to complex, challenging problems. This is precisely the difficult debate that now challenges Hamas in Palestine.

There are lively debates to be had over the depth of regional regimes' commitment to reform, the degree to which the leading opposition group, namely the Islamists, have displayed reflexivity vis-à-vis participant politics, or the prospect for change to come from below or outside the regimes. (Brumberg 2002, Hefner 2004, Kienle 2001, Singerman 1995). Quite aside from those debates, the sad fact is that "democracy" is so intertwined not only with the rhetoric of US policy, but with the wreckage of that policy in the minds of many Middle Easterners that Americans bearing "democracy" are likely to meet with profound distrust. At a time when US endorsement is a dubious credential for political reformers, it is true now more than ever that political reform is not an air plant. It needs roots in the soil of the region. This suggests to us that the path of reform, and perhaps democratization, will not look altogether familiar to North American explorers.



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