

Arab Culture and Future Change

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The Arab world looks like a puzzle that is hard to understand and harder to solve; in fact, no one seems to know with any degree of confidence where and how to start working on solving the puzzle, or if a solution is actually possible at this time. Internal and external forces of change seem to have agreed to pull the region and its peoples and states in different, largely contradictory directions, causing the region to experience increased political instability, state ineffectiveness, economic sluggishness, and moral and cultural deterioration. As a consequence, poverty has spread further, the socioeconomic gaps have widened tremendously, and the sociocultural divides have deepened substantially in every society, except for the Gulf oil exporting states. In light of these developments, uncertainty has become the most certain thing.

One of the main reasons for this uncertainty is the multiplicity of forces that are competing to dominate the region and affect the course of its sociopolitical, socioeconomic and sociocultural change. Arab leaders, caught unprepared, have been unable to face such a formidable challenge; they feel largely helpless and consequently have abandoned their duty to protect the national interest. In fact, no Arab state has so far developed a clear notion of its national interest and therefore, is in a position to articulate a plan to defend or promote any interest. The only interest that Arab leaders know with certainty and seem determined to protect at all costs is to remain in power and use whatever political and economic power they may have to gain more of the same; and employ both powers to appease, suppress and corrupt potential leaders and enlightened forces of change. And while they seem to be succeeding in suppressing free thought and free speech and hindering creative thinking and preventing non-traditional ideas from reaching the masses, Arab rulers are failing miserably in appeasing the religious fundamentalist forces, or even containing their influence. Meanwhile, the Arab masses and their supposedly intellectual leaders, who have more to gain from positive change and most to lose from lack thereof, are doing very little if anything to protect their interests or even articulate a vision for the future of their nations.

Problems facing the Arab people today are many; some of which are economic in nature like high unemployment rates, very low labor productivity, and low per capita incomes; others are sociocultural like high illiteracy and population growth rates, and widespread corruption. There are also many more problems related to the political and security conditions, such as lack of political legitimacy in most countries, civil wars in others, and failure to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict or deal with the worsening Iraqi situation. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has had a catastrophic impact, not only on Iraq but also on the entire region, causing international terrorism to spread, anti-Americanism to deepen, and all issues related to economic development and the transformation of cultures, including the political culture, to be postponed, if not neglected and forgotten. I believe that without the sudden influx of trillions of dollars during the last few years due to the huge increase in the price of oil, the situation in the Arab world would have gotten much worse; it would have drowned the entire region into chaos and conflict.

As The Arab people enter an unprecedented phase of societal transformation characterized by aimless sociocultural, sociopolitical and socioeconomic change, Arab states enter a deepened state of political instability and heightened security challenges that seem to threaten their survival. While the United States is increasing pressure on Arab rulers to transform their cultures and economies and politics in America's image, Islamic fundamentalist forces are pulling the Arab masses toward living and thinking in times long gone, denying them the opportunity to relate to the world in which they live in a meaningful way. On the other hand, forces of traditional nationalism and cultural particularism are calling with increasing intensity for the development of a "culture of resistance," to oppose globalization and undermine its economic and cultural ramifications. And as Arabs try to navigate a turbulent sea of change and transformation, Israel has become more aggressive and expansionist, rejecting all calls for making peace with its Arab neighbors on the basis of recognized UN resolutions and the internationally sanctioned "land for peace" formula. Meanwhile, non-state actors are taking full advantage of the situation to increase their numbers, diversify their activities and become more influential.

The fight in the Middle East, as many Arab and western intellectuals believe, is over values, ideas and ideals; but the West is losing that war; and, in the process, is undermining the credibility of the region's indigenous forces of change and modernization. By claiming that the

war is for the sake of justice, human rights and democracy, while acting as if the Arab people, particularly the Palestinians, deserve no justice or political or economic or human rights, the West in general and the United States in particular, is causing a great harm to its own credibility; it is also weakening the influence of nontraditional Arab intellectuals who are the West's true allies in the fight for western values of freedom, democracy, sociocultural transformation and economic development. The failure of the United States to achieve its strategic objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq and win the war on terrorism seem to have pushed it to opt for political stability at the expense of human rights, democracy and social justice, while associating itself with corrupt regional leaders who support its misguided policies and war on terrorism..

The so-called moderate Arab leaders are in no position to help the West or themselves or their nations; they are largely corrupt autocrats who do not believe in democracy; and therefore, are unwilling to respect the human rights of their peoples or work for genuine societal development and social justice. And due to the newly established Arab media outlets and satellite TV stations, almost all Arab leaders have lost whatever credibility and legitimacy they may have had in the past in the eyes of the Arab masses. They in fact enjoy neither the trust nor the admiration of the majority of the Arab people; they are feared but not respected. And fear can neither build trust nor can it facilitate the articulation of social contracts to tie people together and to their states, and thus create communities of shared interests and common values. Globalization, meanwhile, is being allowed to aggravate poverty and social injustice, nurture suspicion and conspiracy theories, and cause socioeconomic gaps to widen and sociocultural divides to deepen.

The Middle East region, many Americans and Europeans claim, needs a value revolution; in fact, nothing less than a genuine sociocultural revolution to transform the entire social and cultural and political environments will do to give the Arab people a fighting chance to catch up with the rest of the world in the near future. However, sociocultural transformations cannot and should not be attempted from the outside, or be initiated by foreigners. Foreigners, due to their non-traditional cultural backgrounds, tend to replace impressions for facts and rhetoric for action; they also tend to overlook the fact that cultures encompass values and traditions and convictions and attitudes that are most resistant to change. Cultures in fact are very difficult to understand and scientifically analyze and evaluate looking at them from the outside; they need to be placed in their proper historical and civilizational contexts before attempts are considered to study them and evaluate their societal roles. Therefore, cultures should be left to the

indigenous forces of change, the intellectuals and educators and non-traditional leaders to transform; otherwise, the masses will view outside intervention as cultural imperialism and treat it as political and economic hegemony.

No matter how hard western states may try to understand Islam and Muslim radicals, and how persistent the American media may be in trying to undermine the influence and rationale of political Islam, they cannot defeat people willing to die for a holy cause they believe in. Radical Muslims opposed to US Middle East policies are convinced that they are fighting God's war and, therefore, believe that God is on their side. And since no human or state power is capable of defeating God, radical Muslims seen convinced that they will ultimately win their fight against all enemies of Islam and Muslims. They further believe that if they die fighting the enemies of God and Islam before final victory is accomplished, they will go to heaven, the ultimate destination sought by every believer. Therefore, believers are winners in this life if they defeat their enemies, and winners in the afterlife if they die fighting their enemies. "Islam is the solution" is a slogan that no other slogan can outmaneuver at this time.

The only way to win the fight against radical Islam is to pull the rug from underneath its feet by giving younger generations of Arabs a better, more progressive education, and provide them with the right information and ideas that compel them to think critically; and in the process transform their cultures and attitudes and worldviews. Improving the economic and social conditions of the poor and transforming political systems to be more open and respectful of human rights are two strategic tasks that cry for attention. Political systems need to be based on social contracts that regulate relations between the rulers and the ruled and give all individuals and groups the right to fully participate in the political and non-political life of their societies.

Radicals throughout history were able to define with clarity what they stand against, but have always failed to define with coherence what they stand for; they are better at knowing their enemies than knowing their friends. As a consequence, radical forces of the past as well as of today are unable to offer clear and comprehensive programs for reform; particularly programs geared toward helping the poor and oppressed people they claim to be fighting for. Revolutionary slogans have always served radical forces well, promising the masses so much without doing anything meaningful, while giving radicals a good justification to escape accountability. This means that if religious radicals win the war of ideas and manage to control

the state system, they will lead the peoples of the region into a wilderness of chaos, deepened conflict and widespread poverty that nurtures more enmity and less tolerance, more hatred and less love, more ideological polarization and less political unity, more social fragmentation and less social peace and cultural harmony. When former Iranian president Mohammed Khatami was asked in 1999 about the reasons for the lack of economic development in his country, he said, "It is impossible to have economic development in a socially and politically underdeveloped society." This was an honest acknowledgement by president Khatami that Iran, after 30 years of unchallenged religious rule, had failed to achieve either social or political development and therefore was unable to achieve economic development.

Democracy, most enlightened people tend to think, could be the right cure to the societal dilemma facing Arab and non-Arab Third World states in general. While this might be true in an economically advanced and socially developed and largely homogeneous societies like Taiwan and South Korea, democracy provides no cure to the political challenges facing the multiethnic, multicultural and tribal states; or to the politically and economically and socially underdeveloped societies. Western and non-western promoters of democracy in Third World states need to be reminded that western democracy was a major byproduct of the scientific and socioeconomic and sociocultural transformations, including the Reformation, that swept Europe between the 15th and 18th centuries; no Arab or Islamic society has experienced such a transformation yet and, therefore, is ready for the promise and menace of democracy. Kenya is a good example of how the introduction of democracy and elections was instrumental not in uniting and liberating the people of Kenya, but in dividing them along tribal line, causing chaos and bloodshed to follow a contested presidential elections in 2008. Political scientists tell us that for democracy to succeed it has to have certain conditions; noted among them: the existence of a fairly large and conscious and confident middle class, political plurality, regular elections to manage the peaceful transfer of power in society, and a free press. Based on my studies and observations and life experience, there is another major condition, a culture of tolerance. Democracy is not meant to achieve unity, because freedom and equality which democracy promotes and tries to protect, are a recipe for sociocultural and sociopolitical diversity, not for political unity or social harmony or cultural homogeneity. However, conflict in a democratic society, which is a sign of vitality, is solved through dialogue and peaceful means based mostly on compromise and unity of purpose. But for conflicting parties with divergent views to attempt

consensus and achieve compromise, a culture of tolerance has to prevail in society and be accepted by all parties concerned.

In my book, "The Making of History," I argued that the greatest success of democracy in the West was not realized by having democracy establish itself as a political system of governance, but by transforming itself into a social value and a cultural tradition that recognizes that others have equal political and non-political rights. If democracy succeeds as a sociocultural value, it will succeed as a political system; and if democracy fails as a sociocultural value, it will certainly fail as a political system. And to succeed as a sociocultural value, democracy needs to see tolerance implanted in society as an integral part of its mass culture. History, nevertheless, seems to indicate that all ideologically committed leaders and ethnic groups and racial states do not believe in or tend to entertain the idea of practicing tolerance.

Democracy is a major and complicated issue; and therefore it cannot be addressed in a short paper like this one. However, let me offer a small suggestion that could facilitate the holding of honest elections everywhere, and help reduce the frequency of having the results of elections contested. The proposal calls for presidents, or heads of states to be elected for one term only; say 7 years, with no options giving setting presidents an opportunity to run for a second term or allowing former presidents to run for a second time. This proposal, if enacted worldwide, would free elected leaders from the constraints of preparing for second term elections, make elections more honest and transparent, while encouraging elected leaders to be more dedicated to severing the common good than to protecting special interests; it will also give more people a chance to run for the highest job in the country and guarantee the continuation of leadership renewal. (for more on this subject and why it is hard for democracy to take roots in societies still living in pre-industrial times, please consult our book: *The Making of History*; you can view and download any part of the book free of charge from our website: www.yazour.com).

While some western apologists for certain Arab regimes may claim that some Arab states are on their way to democracy, facts on the ground do not support such a claim. None of the conditions of democracy mentioned above exists today in any of the Arab or Islamic states or, for that matter, in any other largely agricultural and mostly underdeveloped Third World society. Democracy in fact has no future in all states and societies that still live under socioeconomic and

sociocultural conditions resembling those of pre-industrial times. If we examine the political map of today's world, we will notice that every socially and culturally and economically developed state is a functioning democracy; yet there is no one socially and economically and culturally underdeveloped state that has a functioning democratic system.

No sociopolitical ideology like nationalism, or socioeconomic ideology like communism, or sociocultural ideology like religion is committed to tolerance, or inclined to respect political dissent, or accept cultural and religious and racial equality, and thus abide by the democratic principles. It can, however, establish a democracy of the masters like the ones practiced today in Iran and in Israel. In Iran only those who supposedly uphold the word of God and obey the orders of God's self-appointed representatives are granted the right to govern and the honor to serve state ideology. In Israel on the other hand, only Jews are considered full citizens of the state of Israel and thus have the right to rule over the land's indigenous people and the Palestinian occupied territories and its people. If radical Islam wins its cultural and political fight, it will establish its own justice that recognizes no authority except that of its mysterious God, whose commandments are interpreted and conveyed to the believers by largely unelected, mostly self-appointed representatives who are less able to help people than use and abuse religious thought and democracy to consolidate their political power and perpetuate their oppressive rule.

If current socioeconomic and sociopolitical and sociocultural trends in Arab states were to continue unchanged for another two to three decades, the religiously conservative forces will more likely win a decisive victory over their secular counterparts. And if this were to happen, any further talk about genuine sociocultural or sociopolitical or socioeconomic transformation in the Middle East would become an exercise in futility; a hopeless hope entertained only by dreamers who lack the ability to relate to reality.

In fact, many of the changes taking place in Arab and Muslim states today seem so unrealistic; they defy rational analysis. States' response to the most serious internal challenges, for example, has been very weak; it reflects abdication of rights to defend communal values and protect the national interest. Attempts to react even to the most threatening external dangers have been formulated in broad, theatrical terms that lack both the honesty to acknowledge reality and the political will to face the impending dangers and deal with their manifestations and

consequences. Changes that are alien to the Muslim experience, and others that are critical of the performance of regimes, are being either ignored or denounced as the product of some evil force. Intellectuals, especially liberal and secular nationalists, are being co-opted, coerced, arrested, or forced to seek refuge in passivity, often in countries other than their own.

Since Islamic societies lack the experience to deal with most issues of our times, such as political democracy, economic development, freedom of speech, the role of the press in society, and the ethics of modern science and technology, fundamentalism is doomed to fail in the long run. In reality, attempts to rejuvenate and politicize Islam and revive Islamic society have boiled down to cloudy program of change based mostly on empty slogans meant to galvanize the masses and encourage them to view the present and shape the future in the image of a glorious yet fading past. However, as a faith based movement, fundamentalism cannot fail; it promises its followers no material gains or even political rights on earth, and therefore, it cannot be held accountable for the consequences of its actions. The only thing that fundamentalism promises its committed followers is a place in Heaven. A believer therefore has to do whatever is asked of him by his religious leaders and wait for the afterlife to find out if his or her religion is able to deliver, assuming that there is a life in the afterlife.

Arab intellectuals who believe that Arab unity is the shortest way to building a strong, progressive nation capable of meeting the challenges of the times are very weak and lack the courage to act. Arab governments are determined to deny the national forces the right to establish political parties and interact with the masses and seek their support. In addition, the strict limits imposed on the press have practically eliminated the possibility to develop a forum where ideas could be freely expressed, new thinking promoted, and constructive dialogue started and sustained. As Arab governments continue to follow this course, fundamentalism continues to deepen its roots, attract more recruits and become the most dominant sociocultural force. In certain instances, fundamentalism has even become the most influential political force, as the cases of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Taliban in Afghanistan, Hamas in Palestine and the Religious Courts in Somalia demonstrate. As a consequence, several countries are threatened of becoming fragmented and dominated by non-state actors.

Arab governments are not the only force using its power to suppress the nationalist forces and deny them the right to be heard; the religious forces are doing the same thing by intimidating

liberal thinkers in general and accusing some of them of being either ignorant of their history and culture and religion, or agents serving foreign interests or atheists deserving capital punishment. The West, in its attempts to divide and rule the Arab world, has worked in the past to oppose the nationalist forces and lend a helping hand to all other forces that opposed nationalism and Arab unity, including the religious forces and the largely corrupt and mostly authoritarian Arab rulers.

Continued suppression of freedoms by Arab governments and lack of credible political and economic opportunity have pushed some intellectuals from all ideological shades to lend their support to the fundamentalists, which are seen as the only social force willing and able to challenge both the United States and Arab political establishment. Intellectuals, however, do this not out of conviction but out of frustration and despair; it is their only way to avenge their defeat by the West and their oppression and marginalization by Arab governments. In such an environment, it was only natural for radical ideas to proliferate, without either the sanction of governments or the approval of the social critics.

To have a fighting chance of winning the war against extremism and injustice, the secular forces in the Arab world must have the freedom to fully participate in the political process and the sociocultural life of society. They must have the freedom to think, write and publish, to organize and mobilize, to debate and challenge culturally and religiously conservative forces and regressive views, and to criticize governments' performances, and hold state officials accountable. And their rights to do so have to be guaranteed by law and protected by state agencies; otherwise, the only change that is likely to happen in all Arab states will be more sociocultural conservatism and religious fundamentalism and political radicalism.

To lend a helping hand to the secular forces fighting religious fundamentalism and cultural conservatism and state oppression and miss use of political and economic power, the West, particularly the European Union, should do at least two things: first; it should continue to pressure all Arab governments to recognize and respect the human and political rights of all individuals and groups and social forces and allow the secular ones to establish forums where they could present their views and ideas and debate the views and challenge the ideas of others. And second; it should help the secular forces establish and manage a new satellite TV station with the power and outreach of the Al Jazeera station to disseminate their critical views and

promote their new, non-traditional ideas. Arab government might claim that granting people more freedom of speech will only help the fundamentalist forces disseminate their ideas further and gain more recruits. While this might be true, the claim is a dishonest attempt to justify oppression of secularism and nationalism and deceive world public opinion. The fundamentalist forces have more than a million forums, about half of them are on Arab land, to present their ideas and debate and refute the ideas and views of their opponents; every mosque in the world is in fact a forum used by fundamentalists five times a day to air their views and promote their ideas and declare war on the ideas of their opponents. Secular forces, however, do not have one single forum and therefore are unable to participate in the debate regarding the future of the Arab world, the state of the Arab culture and economy, and the conditions under which the Arab poor live.

Liberals and conservatives in the Arab world have been fighting a war of ideas since the mid-1960s, with the conservatives winning most of the battles, particularly among the religiously minded, and the hopelessly poor, and the largely ignorant Arab masses. The failure of the first and the success of the second are due to several factors, one of which is the nature of their message. While the message of the liberal and secular forces has been vague and largely alien to the cultural experience of the masses, the message of the religious forces, in contrast, has been simple and authentic. In addition, while it is possible for secular governments and national forces to fail in living up to popular expectations and thus disappoint their constituents, religious forces do not usually fail; they seldom promise people much in life on earth. The only promises religious forces usually make are those that are supposedly await believers in the afterlife. To find out how real such promises are, one must die without sin and, in the current political climate, often accept death as a result of fighting a perceived enemy of God and Islam.

As fundamentalist forces continue to increase their numbers, their sociocultural and sociopolitical influence will increase as well; and this in turn will foster their chances of winning a decisive victory in the war of ideas. And if this were to happen, any further talk about winning the war of ideas within Arab and Muslim societies, or the war on international terrorism would become an exercise in futility, at least for decades to come. In fact, non-state actors are expected to dominate the Arab scene in the near future and gain more freedom to engage their perceived enemies, including the United States and Israel in war. And as they do so, their popularity would rise unless the consequences of their actions become too harsh and too cruel

for the majority of the masses to bear. However, under the current conditions and trends or change, the fundamentalist forces are more likely to become soon the only sociopolitical force that matters, promoting more extremists ideas, pushing more people in the corner, and carrying out more radical acts.

History seems to indicate that every time a nation experiences major setbacks emanating from the failure of its predominant ideology it begins to lose faith in its political leadership and sociocultural institutions and seek salvation in religion, the most resilient force in the life of most peoples. And this in turn gives religious fundamentalism the opportunity to rise, take the initiative and claim the future. However, the future fundamentalism usually envisions tends to be based on an imagined image of a past that had never experienced the kind of challenges posed by the present. In addition, changes that fundamentalist movements usually espouse are mainly behavior oriented that emphasize cultural traditionalism rather than scientific or economic changes that usually emphasize creativity and rationalism. Due to this fact, fundamentalism is less able to deal with the complexities of modern life and its globalizing cultures and economies; and therefore, it cannot avoid failure in the long run.

While changes inspired by fundamentalism are likely to influence the attitudes and social relationships of many people, they are less likely to develop the societal systems and build the state institutions most needed to meet the ever increasing challenges of the times. A fundamentalist society may become more ethical and moral and seeks less pleasure and be content; it is doubtful, however, that it will ever become more economically productive and socially progressive and scientifically and technologically creative; no fundamentalist state in this age is able to gain the kind of knowledge needed to bridge the socioeconomic gaps and sociocultural divides in society, or overcome the scientific and technological gaps that separate the developed from the underdeveloped nations of the world. The lack of new ideas on the one hand, and the hashing and rehashing of the past on the other, make religious fundamentalism a route to escape reality rather than a positive reaction to the challenges posed by it; and illusion rather than a rational solution.

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