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To appreciate recent developments in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world, we need to separate the question of political change from the study of a specific political trajectory—the shift from authoritarianism to democracy—in which it has been couched. Efforts to locate civil society or other "prerequisites" of democratic reform reveal more about the preoccupations of Western scholars than they do about new social configurations in the Middle East today. Democratization is one of several trajectories of political change against which recent developments in Egypt may be contrasted and compared. As the Egyptian case suggests, transformation may occur at the level of the polity even in the absence of a change of regime; such transformation may flow as much from regime exhaustion and "societal conquest" (Stepan 1989) as from change in regime strategy; and the vision of Medina, the paradigmatic Islamic state, can be as powerful as liberal democracy in the envisioning of, and purposeful striving toward, alternatives to present forms of military-bureaucratic rule.

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Civil Society: Effective Tool of Analysis for Middle East Politics?

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Does the Middle East's presumed "exceptionalism" imply the disutility of "civil society" as a tool for political analysis? Although the term has gained wide usage in other areas of the world, the Middle East specialists have shown some reluctance to employ it in their own region. This reluctance stems in part from the perception that the term is ambiguous and politically loaded. Historically, "civil society" has signified everything from the peaceable society human beings enjoy under the protection of a Leviathan state (Hobbes), to the stratum of private associations that schools citizens in civic virtue (Tocqueville, Montesquieu), to the constellation of cultural institutions that guarantee the ideological hegemony of the ruling class (Gramsci). In contemporary political debate, the term has become a normative football, representing a bulwark of freedom and anti-totalitarianism to the survivors of communism's fall in Eastern Europe while signifying the spearhead of Western imperialism to those suspicious of efforts to "export democracy" to the developing world.

But reluctance to use the term in the analysis of Middle Eastern politics goes beyond the problematic nature of the term itself and derives from a vision of the Middle East as somehow inhospitable to "civil society." The Middle East is seen as riven by primordial cleavage, dominated by rent-swollen, power-mongering states, unpracticed in reverence for individual freedom and civil liberties. Sociology, economics, politics, and culture conspire to sabotage the development of civil society in the region and so, the reasoning goes, the term is best renounced to check premature expectations of its realization.

In the final analysis, however, neither of these objections is valid. Certainly the term civil society is ambiguous. How else might one explain the political diversity of its champions in the Middle East today? After all, state officials in the Middle East use the term "civil society" to promote their projects of mobilization and "modernization"; Islamists use it to angle for a legal share of public space; and independent activists and intellectuals use it to expand the boundaries of individual liberty.

Despite their diversity, however, the proponents of civil society are united in their desire to combat despotism. Now, their conceptions of despotism, its sources and remedies, vary tremendously. For some, despotism is associated with theocratic rule, and its remedy lies in the staunch separation of "church" and state. For others, despotism resides in the failure to endow men and women with the power of collective self-determination, and the remedy lies in championing the institutions of *citizenship*, the parties and parliaments, universal suffrage, and majority rule that transform subjects into citizens. For others, despotism derives from the passivity and ignorance that prevents the average citizen from using political institutions effectively. The remedy

lies in inculcating citizens with *civisme*, the participant culture of civic textbooks that trains citizens in activism, reason, and political engagement. For still others despotism springs from tyranny of the majority. The remedy lies either in cultivating a culture of *civility* (one that, as Shils points out, tolerates difference and respect for the rules of the game no matter the diversity in citizens' conception of the good) or in the resolute defense of the individual's *civil liberties* no matter his or her political persuasion.

Secularism, citizenship, civisme, civility, civil liberties—all are remedies to different sources of despotism and all are evoked by the term "civil society." Despite its ambiguity, then, the term is useful because it draws attention to the potential sources and remedies of despotism in the Middle East (as elsewhere). Equally important, the term has become the watchword of political mobilization in the region. Over the last decade, ordinary citizens in the Middle East (from the Islamist-inspired urban poor to emancipated women concerned about personal status rights) have been drawn into political life to an unprecedented degree and their engagement has been framed by the debate over civil society's boundaries. The local resonance of the term, then, further reinforces its utility as a tool for exploring political dynamics in the region.

As for the claim that conditions in the Middle East are not propitious for the development of civil society, appearances may belie reality. Factors that might be expected to work against the development of civil society (e.g., deep cleavages along primordial lines) may in fact be forces for the development of civility, civisme, and the rights of citizenship (see Sheila Carapico's work on Yemen for the role tribal associations have played in pressing for citizenship rights in that country). And oil revenues whose abundance once buoyed Middle Eastern states into a position of near unaccountable autonomy are now in drastic decline, forcing states to reconsider sharing power with their subjects. Combined with social developments once celebrated by the "modernization" school (e.g., rising literacy rates, and growing middle classes . . .), conditions are not altogether unfavorable for the development of civil society in the region. In fact, the most significant impediment to further development of civil society in the Middle East may have little to do with anything exceptional to the region (whether cultural, sociological, or economic), but rather may derive from the simple reluctance of powerful states (or rather, state elites) to cede privilege and prerogative and make space for civil society. This is an altogether common phenomenon, not specific to any region.

The fact that reluctant states (rather than exceptional cultural, economic, or sociological factors) may be the most important impediment to the advance of civil society in the Middle East is clearest in the case of Tunisia. Tunisia is one of the countries least ridden with Middle Eastern "exceptionalisms." It is ethnically and religiously homogenous, it has had a protracted experience of political identity that long predates the era of colonial mapmaking, it is relatively rent-poor (and, in fact, fiscal crisis forced the Tunisian state to adopt one of the region's earliest experiments in economic liberalization), and it is blessed with a relatively large, comparatively well-educated middle class. Conditions, then, are propitious for the development of civil society, whether defined in terms of goals of civisme, civility, or citizenship. Nonetheless, the advance of civil society has been stalled by a regime unwilling to cede political control and submit to the discipline of inviolate civil liberties and open, institutionalized contestation. At work are state elites' classic concern to retain privilege and prerogative as well as a paternalistic instinct that persuades them that Tunisian society is still "immature" and better served by having its destiny orchestrated from above. Perhaps the only thing that is exceptional about the state's authoritarian project in Tunisia is the allies it finds in society. Whereas intellectuals are typically at the forefront of campaigns to expand the boundaries of civil society, in Tunisia intellectuals have lately rallied behind the state's authoritarianism. This occurs because the state has successfully persuaded them that further opening will cede power to Islamists and potentially nurture an Islamic regime. Given the choice between laic authoritarianism and theocratic authoritarianism, most intellectuals prefer the former, arguing that at least under a secular regime (especially one that draws its ideological inspiration from Western models) the struggle for political opening might still be given opportunity.

Aside from this peculiarity, the dynamics of civil society's development in the Middle East are likely to replicate those found in any region struggling with authoritarian legacies. The notion of civil society should not be renounced by students of the Middle East because it focuses our attention on despotism in all its incarnations (intolerance, passivity, incomplete citizenship rights, insecure civil liberties) and because it captures an ideal that Middle Easterners are actively struggling over (and for) themselves. This struggle will be governed by much the same logic that governs such transitions elsewhere. By retaining the term civil society we will combat the tendency toward Middle East exceptionalism and invite comparative, cross-regional analysis of this dynamic process.

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