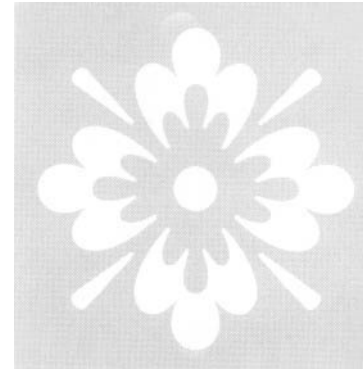


CIVIL SOCIETY

Is civil society in the Arab world being repressed by authoritarian regimes?

Viewpoint: Yes. Civil society in the Arab world has become a last refuge for repressed populations rather than a foundation for political development.

Viewpoint: No. Civil society in Arab states is much more prominent than popularly perceived and in the near future could be a dynamic foundation for the growth of political liberalization.



Civil society has become something of a “buzzword” in the field of Middle East studies (and in political science in general) over the past decade, especially as it has become linked to the prospects of democratic growth in the Arab Middle East, which is composed primarily of states that are in some form or fashion autocratic. Although the term *civil society* dates back to the Greco-Roman period, its modern construction, as defined by eighteenth-century political theorists from Georg Hegel to Thomas Paine and cited by Thomas Carothers, is as “a domain parallel to but separate from the state—a realm where citizens associate according to their own interests and wishes.”

In the aftermath of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, democracies seemed to be emerging globally in the 1990s. Because of this political shift, the nature of civil society, without which a sustainable democracy cannot be created nor survive and that also provides a kind of dialectical foundation to the institutional structures of democracy, was studied more closely as a possible index of democratic formation. As such, the accoutrements of civil society, especially nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—such as advocacy groups concerned with the environment, human rights, women’s issues, freedom of the press, election monitoring, and so forth—became subjects of debate and examination. Civil society incorporates much more than just NGOs, however, also including student groups, trade unions, professional organizations, sports clubs, community groups, and cultural and religious organizations—in other words, all of the associations that exist outside of the state.

With U.S. involvement in the Middle East growing exponentially since the end of the Cold War, and as a result of the Persian Gulf War (1990–1991), presidential administrations have been compelled to encourage democratic growth in the Arab world if only to make the U.S. presence in the region more palatable to an American public that has traditionally been squeamish about supporting autocratic regimes. At a time when Israel, as a viable democracy, is often contrasted with the Arab states and when questions after the attacks of 11 September 2001 revolve around the facilitating environment for terrorists created by repressive regimes and the growth of Islamic extremist movements in the Arab world, the issue of civil society and the extent to which it exists in various Arab countries has become a salient one.



Viewpoint:
Yes. Civil society in the Arab world has become a last refuge for repressed populations rather than a foundation for political development.

The concept of civil society and its relations with democracy has been prominent in the discussion of state-society relations in the Middle East and elsewhere in the developing world. Civil society broadly refers to the existence of organized groups that through organized activities empower the individual in society; in theory, civil society checks the power of the state and thus improves prospects for democracy. Furthermore, broad usage sometimes makes civil society seem indistinguishable from society as a whole, and the precise components of civil society supposedly causing or correlating with democracy's emergence are left to speculation. Moreover, there is an understating of how the state can spoil prospects for democratization. The influence of the state on society is as important—or more important—as the influence of society on the state.

The Arab world has been stigmatized with political stagnation for much of the latter half of the twentieth century. Despite rapid socio-economic changes, political systems in most Arab countries remain parochial, dominated either by family rulers and patrimonial leadership and/or a powerful elite, military personalities, and entrenched traditional, clerical, bureaucratic, or technocratic interests. Arab states have, through regulations and bureaucratic control, coercion, and corruption, dampened the emergence and the development of civil society and its agents. Civil society has remained at the mercy of the state and its dominant elite, despite increases in wealth, literacy rates, and the rise of educated technocrats and professionals across the Arab world. Civil society remains for the most part ineffective and unable to challenge the hegemony of the Arab state.

States in the Middle East share similar characteristics with states in other developing countries. Thanks mainly to petrodollars, foreign military and financial support, and the weakness of local political opposition, Middle Eastern states have expanded their power. States in the region dominate the society and economy to the extent that they have become centers of tremendous wealth and prestige. Even the local bourgeoisie, in theory a major historical force behind democratization in the West, is highly dependent on the state for financing, contracts, employment, and protection. Indeed, the weakness of the middle class—and its economic dependence on the

state—is a key factor in the continuing power of the state. The decline in financial capability of the state in the Middle East in the 1980s and 1990s forced it to give a freer hand to the private sector, with the state cutting back its involvement in such areas as education, health, and welfare. The state, however, remains authoritarian and unwilling to genuinely share political power.

Through revenue-raising measures and expenditures, governments influence the distribution not only of income (and wealth) but also of political power. According to Bruce E. Moon and William J. Dixon, through public policies aimed at land reform, education, nationalizing the economy, and “laws governing labor-management and landowner-peasant relations, the state has the potential to alter the relative power of various groups with implications for their success in non-state political interactions.”

In fact, the Arab states have relied on traditional sources of political authority such as religion, charisma, kinship, and family ties to maintain their hold on power: they have relied largely on informal, not institutional, bases of political power. Personal, family, and group ties help sustain the executive power of the ruling elites. The sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf are perhaps the primary examples of extreme personalized autocratic rule. Others such as Tunisia, Turkey, and Iran (although the last two are non-Arab states) show a changing state-society balance, with institutionalization of power relationships gradually undermining informal and arbitrary power associations.

The ruling elite in the Middle East, along with their allies in top-level positions in institutions and agencies of the state, continue to resist pressure for power sharing. The prospects for democracy increase only when the growth and strength of rival social, economic, and political groups pushing for power sharing leaves the weakened state with no choice but to loosen its grip on power. Ultimately, prospects for democracy will increase when societal pressure on the state opens the way for political democracy. Of course, the state might choose to use force on some level to continue its monopoly over socio-economic resources and political power, but a continuing coercive policy can prove more harmful than beneficial to the political elite in the long run, especially where the modernization process has led to the growth of a vibrant, organized civil society. The rise of new social groups and classes (such as bureaucrats, technocrats, business and professional groups, and labor) in the modernization process usually leads to changes in state-society relations. The ruling elite either tries to preserve its status by accommodating to some extent the demand for wider political participation and better economic opportunities (for example, Turkey,

Tunisia, and Jordan), resists any meaningful concession to the opposition, increasing the risk for eventual political instability (Oman, Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf states, Egypt, Pakistan, and Iran before the 1979 revolution), or chooses a policy of oppression (Libya, Algeria, Syria, and Iraq).

Society in much of the Middle East persists as weak and powerless, and it is thus unable to check the power of the state as long as socio-economic structure remains underdeveloped (people remain illiterate, poor, undereducated, and so on), and opposition to the state, such as by labor unions, remains poorly organized. Structural changes within the society can produce demands for democratic participation in power sharing, leading to increasing pressure on the dominant elite—inside and outside of the state domain—to let go of power.

The strength or weakness of the state in developing countries must be looked at in the context of the position of the state vis-à-vis society. The state might appear omnipresent and strong where a society is weak, or the state might appear weak relative to a society well organized into interest groups and associations with effective influence in the distribution of socio-economic resources and political power. In advanced industrial democracies the primary role of the state is the preservation of peace, order, and security, along with some redistribution policies (such as welfare programs). The role of the state in the economy remains far less involved where private business dominates. This arrangement does not prove that the state in developed countries is weak. On the contrary, the state is strong, as shown by its ability to tax and regulate, but the limits to government power in developed countries arise from groups with tremendous economic and political power of their own, organized into pressure groups.

State power in Middle Eastern countries is largely based on informal rather than institutional structures, for it is personal, family, and group ties that help sustain the executive power of the ruling elite. The Middle East is not the only area with a pattern of patrimonial leadership, as many developing countries display the same phenomenon. The nature of the ruling elite's autocratic power varies in Arab countries. The Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, including Saudi Arabia, are perhaps the primary examples of highly traditional autocratic rule. Turkey and Tunisia in the Middle East and South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brazil elsewhere in the developing world are examples on the other end of the spectrum. The last-named countries testify to the changing balance of state-society relations in favor of society, as institutionalization of independent power relationships is gradually undermining informal and arbitrary state power associations. There has been a slow

emergence of independent groups and associations. For example, organized labor by itself, or through an alliance with the middle class, can check the power of the state and promote democracy. Unfortunately, labor unions, a primary agent of civil society in the Middle East, remain either nonexistent, repressed, and/or controlled by the state.

Overall, opposition political parties in the Muslim Middle East have been ineffective in challenging the domination of governments' political parties. In all national elections in the Middle East between 1980 and 1999, only in Iran (1989, 1997), Turkey (1991, 1995), and Israel (1992, 1996, 1999) did a change in the government actually occur—and none of these are Arab states. In all other cases where elections were held, the ruling government's political parties maintained their control of the state (national elections were held since 1980 in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Yemen, as well as in the Palestinian territories). Such mechanisms as restricting voter and candidate eligibility, gerrymandering, legal constraints on political parties, and choice of electoral system are used by governments to maintain a political monopoly. Furthermore, according to Jillian Schwedler, "many governments [in the Middle East] adopt or change laws between elections in order to produce different results."

In some Arab countries economic and political crises have been responsible for some political opening and electoral participation, not at the end of a long process of gradual expansion in inclusiveness. The challenge posed by economic slowdown and the popularity of Islamic movements have been the primary reasons behind some political opening in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, which all experienced a decline in the quality of life over the course of the 1980s. "And in two cases—Algeria and Jordan—a sharp economic crisis appears to [have] galvanized the governments into major democratization reforms," as noted by Michael Hudson. Both Egypt and Jordan introduced political reforms to channel growing opposition caused by deteriorating economic conditions and high unemployment and to defuse the threat of fundamentalism.

The better educated and the healthier, wealthier, and more organized the people, the stronger the society in protecting itself from domination by the state. These resources allow for the formation of institutions that act as foci for debate and discussion without resorting to violence. For the systematic and orderly channeling of the demands of contesting elites for political leadership, institutionalization is thus essential for political stability. Political parties, whether religious or not, must function within an independent organi-



PEOPLE CHOOSE FREEDOM

On 12 December 2002, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed an audience at the Heritage Foundation on U.S. plans for the spread of democracy in the Middle East:

Given a choice between tyranny and freedom, people choose freedom. We need only look to the streets of Kabul, filled with people celebrating the end of Taliban rule last year. There are rays of hope in the Middle East, as well. Countries such as Bahrain, Qatar, and Morocco have embarked on bold political reforms. Civic organizations are increasingly active in many Arab countries, working on bread-and-butter issues such as securing badly needed identity cards for women. We are also seeing an explosion of media outlets, from satellite television stations to weekly tabloids. Though some still do not live up to their responsibility to deliver responsible coverage and factual information, altogether they are making information available to more people than ever before. And with information, ultimately comes knowledge, knowledge to raise young people up, knowledge about what is happening in other parts of the world. Still, too many Middle Easterners are ruled by closed political systems. Too many governments curb the institutions of civil society as a threat, rather than welcome them as the basis for a free, dynamic, and hopeful society. And the language of hate, exclusion, and incitement to violence is still all too common throughout the region. As Morocco's King Mohammed told his country's parliament two years ago, "to achieve development, democracy, and modernization, it is necessary to improve and strengthen political parties, trade unions, associations, and the media, and to enlarge the scope of participation."

Any approach to the Middle East that ignores its political, economic, and educational underdevelopment will be built upon sand. It is time to lay a firm foundation of hope. Hope is what my presentation today is about. America wants to align itself with the people of the Middle East, moving forward on the basis of hope, hope for peace, hope for a better life for the children of the Middle East and the children of the world. To that end, I am announcing today an initiative that places the United States firmly on the side of change, on the side of reform, and on the side of a modern future for the Middle East, on the side of hope. . . . I am pleased to announce the initial results of our work—an innovative set of programs and a framework for future cooperation that we call the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative. The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative is a bridge between the United States and the Middle East, between our governments and our peoples, an initiative

that spans the hope gap with energy, ideas, and funding. Our Partnership Initiative is a continuation, and a deepening, of our longstanding commitment to working with all the peoples of the Middle East to improve their daily lives and to help them face the future with hope. Just as our decision to rejoin UNESCO is a symbol of our commitment to advancing human rights and tolerance and learning, so this Initiative is a concrete demonstration of our commitment to human dignity in the Middle East. We are initially dedicating \$29 million to get this Initiative off to a strong start. Working with Congress, we will seek significant additional funding for next year. These funds will be over and above the more than \$1 billion we provide in economic assistance to the Arab world every year. Our initiative rests on three pillars. We will engage with public and private sector groups to bridge the jobs gap with economic reform, business investment, and private sector development. We will partner with community leaders to close the freedom gap with projects to strengthen civil society, expand political participation, and lift the voices of women. And, we will work with parents and educators to bridge the knowledge gap with better schools and more opportunities for higher education. . . . The second pillar of our Partnership Initiative will support citizens across the region who are claiming their political voices. We began the first pilot project in this area last month, when we brought a delegation of 55 Arab women, women political leaders, brought them to the United States to observe our mid-term elections. I had an excellent meeting with this remarkable group, and I was inspired by their energy and their commitment. They put tough questions to me, and we debated the issues as people do in a free society. These women were proud of their heritage. They spoke eloquently of their dreams of a world where their children could grow up and live in peace. They told of their hopes to see an end to the conflicts that cripple their region. They also spoke of their expectations of America. They talked about how they want control over their own lives and their own destinies. And, they asked to know more about American democracy, and how to make their own voices more effective. Increased political participation also requires strengthening the civic institutions that protect individual rights and provide opportunities for participation. Through our Partnership Initiative we will support these efforts.

Source: "Powell Launches Middle East Partnership Initiative," 12 December 2002, United States Embassy, Israel, website <<http://usembassy-israel.org.il/publish/peace/archives/2002/december/121301.html>>.

zational network in which final decisions are made and executed without constant interference from state bureaucracies.

Islam has historically remained on the periphery of state politics, overshadowed by secular authoritarian states. Furthermore, the overall structure of the post-World War II political economy in the region helped consolidate state power. States dependent on oil rent and external support in the form of military, economic, and financial aid led to the monopolization of domestic power during the Cold War era. The Arab-Israeli conflict also increased regime hegemony by providing an excuse for inadequacies in socio-economic performance and legitimizing authoritarianism.

Islam is no more innately antidemocratic than Judaism or Christianity. The popularity of Islam in the 1980s was largely a reflection of the bankruptcy of other alternatives posed to resolve social ills than some inevitable preference for authoritarianism or an antidemocratic society. It is economic crisis, coupled with a crisis of legitimacy, in most Muslim states that has encouraged and strengthened religious opposition. Religious groups and movements and their leaders can be pragmatic contenders for state power as much as their secular counterparts. Islamic candidates and organizations have participated in elections in Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait, as well as in Pakistan and Malaysia.

John Esposito argues that in countries such as “Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, and Pakistan, Islamic organizations have been among the best-organized opposition forces, and are often willing to form alliances or cooperate with political parties, professional syndicates, and voluntary associations to achieve shared political and socio-economic reforms.” The cases of post-Revolution Iran, in particular, and other self-declared Islamic states such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia provide vivid examples of the triumph of realism over ideology and rhetoric. In short, Muslim groups and associations have the capacity to contribute positively to the development of civil society and democracy in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world.

Civil society is often associated with the presence of viable and effective associations and interest groups that help check the power of the state and promote active citizenry participation in the management of society. There seems to hold an association between civil society and democracy, but what really constitutes civil society is often unclear: the characteristics are left for speculation. What distinguishes society from civil society is important in that it reflects the viability and effectiveness of agents of civil society in checking and controlling the authoritarian urges of the state. In the Arab world, the Middle East, and the develop-

ing countries in general, the state has historically dominated almost all aspects of state-society relations. The extensive involvement of the state in the economy; its control of natural resources; its bureaucratic, regulatory, and military power; and its hold over institutional and organizational foundations of society all have left societies in the developing world at the mercy of state power. In the Arab world, the state continues to resist power sharing and is loathe to relinquish its control over vast economic and social resources. The movement toward relatively more-open societies in a few Arab countries such as Jordan, Tunisia, and Bahrain reflects not drastic shifts in power away from the state and in favor of the society but economic crises, political upheavals, and overall uncertainties of the post-Cold War era. Arab states remain in dire need of reform, where organized and institutionalized opposition to the state remains either nonexistent or weak. The tension from globalization and the American war on terrorism is supposedly putting some pressure on some Arab states for political reform, but prospects for real change are ultimately dependent on events taking place inside these countries, shaping the nature of the state-society relations.

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Viewpoint:
No. Civil society in Arab states is much more prominent than popularly perceived and in the near future could be a dynamic foundation for the growth of political liberalization.

Italian Marxist social thinker Antonio Gramsci argued that “a crisis cannot give the attacking forces the ability to organize with lightning speed in time and in space; still less can it endow them with fighting spirit. Similarly, the defenders are not demoralized, nor do they abandon their positions, even among the ruins, nor do they lose faith in their own strength or their own future.” Ever since the demise of the Soviet bloc, partly because of the strength of a vibrant civil society that developed within the womb of the Communist order, the concept of civil society has taken on major importance in the study of democratization. Indeed, many scholars and politicians view the materialization of civil society as one of the prerequisites of democratization and its consolidation.

The literature on democratization, which blossomed in the mid 1980s, conspicuously neglects

the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). For example, the major, four-volume study on democratization in the Third World—Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset's *Democracy in Developing Countries* (1988–1989)—deliberately excludes MENA because, as the editors stated, “Islamic countries of the Middle East and North Africa generally lack much previous democratic experience, and most appear to have little prospect of transition to even semi-democracy.” The reason for this neglect stems from the so-called exceptionalism of that region. Those who hold this view argue that for a variety of reasons—Islamic traditions, patriarchal political cultures, and the absence of strong civil societies—MENA countries are unlikely ever to make the transition to democracy. What these studies omitted, though, is that while world attention in the 1980s focused on changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, few seemed to notice the change, though incremental and hesitant, that had started even earlier in the Arab world, particularly in North Africa. New groups surfaced to challenge the autocratic state, albeit through different means and at dissimilar levels of intensity. For instance, even if spontaneous and lacking effective organization, the riots of October 1988 in Algeria shook the foundations of the authoritarian regime and compelled it to open up an era of liberalization that saw the establishment of hundreds of independent organizations and a relatively free press. Clearly, emerging civil societies in the Arab world have rejected authoritarian, “developmentalist” governments, and they are calling, though with little degree of success so far, for governments that will institute more social justice and allow for greater individual freedoms. Undoubtedly, civil societies in MENA have the potential of playing a consequential role in the process of liberalization and, eventually, democratization in the region. Although those who are pessimistic about the prospects for democratization in MENA have some valid reasons, there are also signs for optimism.

The history of the concept of civil society is more than two hundred years old. Yet, it reappeared in the late 1980s, and the concept has dominated current debates on democratization. Civil society embraces many “private,” yet potentially autonomous, public sectors distinct from the state. Such sectors are regulated by various associations existing within them, preventing society from degenerating into a shapeless mass. At least two ingredients characterize civil society: distinction and autonomy from the state. Civil society consists of a network of economic, intellectual, political, and religious associations, which are independent of the state and of the family but not totally separate from them. In other words, as Diamond explains, “civil society is the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and

bound by a legal order or set of shared rules. . . . It involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable.” Civil society is also what Gramsci described as the space for ideological struggle and for ideological hegemony, a characteristic that contemporary authors have often overlooked in their discussion of the concept. The concept of civil society, as opposed to the more general concept of society, helps analysts to distance themselves from the statist approaches that dominated the analysis of MENA politics until the late 1980s. Indeed, Arab intellectuals on the whole were state centered and criticized the state, only to demand a more important and more effective intervention of that very same state while completely ignoring the role of civil society. Only mass organizations, linked to the single ruling parties, had any consideration.

Civil society figures even more prominently in the theories on the transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes because it plays a critical role once liberalization of the authoritarian regime has begun. One of the consequences of authoritarian regimes is, evidently, the depoliticizing and atomizing of society through repressive measures, ideological domination, and the restriction of the space of political action to the mere pursuit of private goals. In other words, the state is in total command of the public sphere and prevents organizational or group autonomy where political identities could be expressed.

In most Middle Eastern countries, whatever their ideological orientation, civil society has been the victim of autocratic rulers who have succeeded in controlling it to a degree. The rentier states, in particular, have succeeded in eliciting and maintaining a considerable level of consensus from both the masses and the elite. Intellectuals provided justification for a strong state and overlooked its repressive measures in the name of modernization and nation building. The intelligentsia in MENA, in fact, never became the catalyst of new critical associations within civil society; if anything, they viewed the burgeoning pluralism to be a factor of *fitna* (disunity) for the revolution. For decades, central power held almost total control over society. The “opposition”—muted as it was—consisted only of supporting the power in place so as not to create divisions within the nation. It was forbidden from seeking power or from attempting to weaken the established regimes, let alone presenting itself as a distinct or autonomous component, and those regimes supported by the so-called progressive Left—such as Algeria under Houari Boumedienne, Egypt under Gamal Abdal-Nasser, and the Baathists in Iraq and Syria—proved that they could mobilize quickly against any genuine opposition.

Although frequently the target of revolutionary rhetoric, the “business class” (bourgeoisie) agreed to a tacit pact with the regimes. They renounced any prominent political role and followed the state’s main economic guidelines in exchange for the state’s acquiescence in allowing them to make sizable profits. The state therefore controlled the working masses through a combination of social benefits and repression. The intellectuals, the new capitalist class (usually concentrated in the public sector), and the trade unions (controlled by the state through the single party) formed a common front favoring authoritarian control instead of forming the basis for civil society.

Those who view the prospects of democratization in MENA as chimerical base their arguments precisely on the durability of the authoritarian state and for the outside military, economic, and political support that some Arab autocratic regimes—such as the Persian Gulf states, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia—receive from Western democracies for “strategic” reasons. One of the major arguments of the pessimists is captured in the Arab Human Development Reports (2002), which found that the barrier to better Arab performance is not the lack of resources but three “deficits”: freedom, knowledge, and woman power. They rightly hold the view that absolute autocracies have survived and that confusion between the executive and the judiciary branches in most of the MENA countries has continued. They also observe that there are major constraints on the media and civil society and that the social environment is patriarchal and intolerant. In sum, despite elections—often phony—and the signing of human-rights conventions, democratization is almost nonexistent. Democracy is sporadically offered as a concession, not as a right. Other observers discount the rise of Arab civil society, arguing that political parties, in places where they have emerged, are not only weak and their opposition to ruling regimes mediocre, but also that they have actually been the creation of the ruling regimes. Because practices within the structures of these parties are said to be undemocratic, such analysts question the ability of these parties to rule democratically should they ever come to power. Thus, even the more hopeful among these pessimists shed serious doubts about democratic prospects of MENA, the rise of a civil society notwithstanding.

Some analysts of MENA, including Arab scholars such as Fouad Ajami, argue that prevailing Islamic traditions will make it difficult for these countries to make genuine and lasting transitions to democratic government. In the 1980s, Samuel Huntington, in contrast to what he later came to believe, argued that prospects for democratic development in the Middle East were slim. That pessimism derives from an old established

neo-Orientalist tradition that views Islamic societies as resistant to change. Orientalists and neo-Orientalists believe that Islamic societies are incapable of producing a middle class; they argue that the absence of a middle class is tied to the lack of entrepreneurial spirit and achievement motivation. Despotism and economic backwardness, in their assessment, are therefore the hallmarks of Islamic societies. The suspicion and lack of cooperation that have allegedly characterized Islamic societies account for the failure of the evolution of capitalism and democracy. Academics and journalists who subscribe to analyses based on political culture argue forcefully that Islam and democracy are simply incompatible. The fact that Islam allegedly does not allow for secular rule and thus that sovereignty rests solely with God excludes Islamic society from achieving a democratic order. Elie Kedourie argues that “the idea of democracy is quite alien to the mindset of Islam.” In his view “there is nothing in the political traditions of the Arab world—which are the political traditions of Islam—which might make familiar, or indeed intelligible, the organizing ideas of constitutional and representative government.” Lacking are any references to the many thought-provoking works demonstrating that secular traditions do in fact exist in Islam.

These views on the authoritarian influence of Islam fail to take into account the diversified beliefs within Islam or ways in which it is, in fact, opposed to authoritarianism. The works of Islamic thinkers who have demonstrated the compatibility of Islam and democracy have been totally overlooked.

The more optimistic view also has merit. Without denying the problems that plague the region, it is perhaps important to highlight some of the changes that have inevitably had an impact on the future of MENA. Perhaps the most important factor was the failure of state-led developmental programs, despite their initial successes. In most MENA countries, the widespread corruption, absence of democratic freedoms, the marginalization or sheer exclusion of large segments of society (especially young people), arbitrary rule, clientelism, nepotism, and human-rights violations caused the ruling elites to lose their legitimacy, which explains the appeal of the Islamist wave. Severe socio-economic crises caused by inflation, soaring international debt, high unemployment, and mismanagement of resources, coupled with no means of redress through democratic institutions, resulted in the repudiation of the tacit social contract that rulers had established with the ruled following independence from colonial domination. The crises allowed new social groups to challenge the authority and legitimacy of the state with an intensity and on a scale never previously witnessed. Although Islamists were the

“Image not available for copyright reasons”

leading force opposing the state, others—including cultural groups, human-rights organizations, students’ organizations, moderate Islamists, business associations, and women’s associations—are now political forces. Literally tens of thousands of independent organizations sprang up throughout the region. According to Jillian Schwedler, “although the existence of civil society in the Middle East (or anywhere) does not mean that countries are on the verge of democratization, it does illustrate that citizens are both willing and able to play a role in shaping the state policies that govern their lives. And, as the experiences in Central and Eastern Europe illustrate, reform depends as much on the will of the citizens as on the willingness of the government.” Clearly, failing economies induced regimes to liberalize in order to bring about the necessary reforms and to implement the austerity programs imposed by international financial institutions. To survive, many MENA regimes allowed a degree of economic and political liberalization (holding of elections, legalization of human rights organizations, and so on). They initiated liberalization in the hope that civil society would support them and would stop contesting their authority. The governments also hoped that such limited liberalization would curtail the potential for violence and destabilization.

Feeling threatened, many regimes tried to confine or stifle their opponents. The inability of

regimes to respond to the increasing demands of their citizens, and of their previous social allies, compelled them to disengage from sectors of which they had traditionally been in charge. However, despite the weakening of the state and the relative strength of civil society in a few countries, the state still has more financial, institutional, and ideological capacities than civil society. This concentration of power obviously means that civil society, as well as political society—which in Hegel and Gramsci’s sense refers to political parties—need to continue their struggle. In particular, secular and moderate Islamist political parties, where they exist, must oppose strong challenges to autocratic regimes. No doubt, a degree of civility and dedication to democracy must exist within society at large, for without tolerance and acceptance of the other, the political and social struggle would turn violent, as the Algerian case illustrates. Indeed, as noted by Edward Shils, “as a feature of civil society [civility] considers others as fellow-citizens of equal dignity in their rights and obligations as members of civil society; it means regarding other persons, including one’s adversaries, as members of the same inclusive collectivity, i.e., members of the same society, even though they belong to different parties or to different religious communities or to different ethnic groups.” In Algeria and Jordan, for instance, parliamentary debates have gradually become the forum where

opposition forces learn to tolerate one another. In other states, no matter how imperfect the system is, its existence has allowed some degree of expression and democratic education.

Undoubtedly, the old rulers have put up stiff resistance and have severely constrained civil society—as in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt—but civil society has waged an incessant war of attrition, which will eventually force the regimes to negotiate transition pacts toward a more democratic order. Sooner or later the old rulers, who are leaving the MENA scene anyway, will need to compensate for their lack of legitimacy and the fragility of their rule by negotiating honorable pacts with civil society. Controlled or tutelary democracy might be the first step toward liberalization and democratization in MENA. No doubt, the process will be slow because democracy itself is a process, not an end.

The real brake to democratization in MENA is not cultural—even if the ideology of radical Islamists gives credence to such perception—but rather the resistance of the old rulers to allow sweeping change to take place. Thus, as Albert Schnabel puts it: “What is required is not the immediate (or even eventual) adoption of full-fledged Western-style liberal democracy, but a gradual process toward more participation in the political and economic life and governance of the country, in harmony with religious norms and teachings respected throughout society.”

Although conditions in MENA look bleak, there is also reason for hope. Societies are not static but are prone to change, which is precisely why the culturalist thesis is refuted. In fact, prospects for democratization in MENA countries are not so different from those for other Third World societies. For instance, similar to the Orientalists and neo-Orientalists with respect to MENA’s prospects for democratization, specialists in the past argued that Latin American countries, because of their inherent authoritarian political culture and the Catholic religion, would be forever doomed to remain authoritarian. The widespread and enduring trend toward democracy in Latin America suggests strongly that this view is invalid. Comparable arguments made about MENA are also incorrect even if the current conditions give more credibility to the pessimists, who, incidentally, tend to overlook the information revolution in MENA and its potential impact in accelerating sociopolitical change. No doubt the development of a “network society” will have implications in breaking the power of the authoritarian state and the institution of pluralistic societies in MENA. This arena is not to forget the

remarkable struggle that the independent press, especially in Algeria, has waged in not only informing and educating public opinion but also in challenging rulers. The tremendous courage of some journalists in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and elsewhere, who have faced imprisonment and unbearable harassment, illustrates this willingness of civil society to bring about change in the region. This journalistic activism, indeed, is a hopeful development.

One can only concur with Schnabel that “there is hope for progress [in MENA] if the countries in the region become more prosperous, more cooperative, less influenced by the preferences of external powers, and supported and assisted by a restructured, reformed, and neutral United Nations.” Whether these conditions materialize and whether the United States, the global hegemonic power, and Europe are willing to genuinely assist in the establishment of a democratic order will be paramount in determining the democratization of MENA.

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