

INTRODUCTION

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The global trend toward more open political systems is by no means immutable, and autocratic rule is certainly not obsolete, but "democracy" vibrantly resonates in all of the corners of the world. The simple ideas that people should have a voice in decisions that effect their lives, that government should respond to citizens' needs, that people have a right to not be mistreated by their rulers seems to provoke little controversy, except, that is, until we come to the Middle East and, particularly, the Arab world. There democracy is said to have little resonance.

Judging from recent articles in leading journals of opinion like *Foreign Affairs*, a new global bipolarity is emerging.¹ Unlike the Cold war, the yawning divide is not ideological but cultural. Yet, the stakes are every bit as high as during the Cold war when vast collections of people were ideologically summarized. Today, there is an alarming tendency for informed observers to argue passionately for basic freedoms in the West, while reacting with utter skepticism to the simple proposition that these same basic freedoms also have a home in the world beyond the familiar confines of "our" world. Any dichotomization of humanity is alarming, but this one also has a self-fulfilling quality to it, especially since leading statesmen and policymakers in the West now contemplate building policies on the presumption that the world is cleaved culturally between those with a yearning for freedom and those content to live in bondage.

The central arena for civilizational jousting between Muslim societies and the West is the Middle East. Not surprisingly, western arguments to the effect that the people of the Middle East are—in the main—ill-suited not to say hostile to democracy, have been music to the ears of autocrats who have repaired their frayed partnerships with the denizens of western policymaking circles, producing, at times, some unsavory alliances. The coins of the realm in these circles are stability and order. Thus, vocal advocates of elections and political participation are suddenly mute when they step into Middle Eastern realms. Often, the silence

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22-49.

is loud indeed, as in 1992 when the Algerian army nullified elections or in 1993 when successful elections in Yemen were met with studious diplomatic indifference in major western chanceries.

Nonetheless, the authoritarian rulers of the region confront burgeoning demands and continuing erosion of their legitimacy. The end of the Cold war has made the rulers' dilemmas even more severe, since they may no longer count on the automatic support of a world power, and since they have lost one rationale for maintenance of muscle-bound national security states.² As the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict appears increasingly plausible, if not over-determined, a related complication emerges for governments that have justified domestic shortages, the diversion of civilian resources to support the military, and the suspension of basic political rights by recourse to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Arguably, as the reality of an end to this central conflict sinks into public consciousness in the Arab countries and perhaps in Israel as well, demands for a share of the "peace dividend" will be heard. The Middle East after the Arab-Israeli conflict will likely experience an acceleration in domestic political crises, as well as a rejuvenation of domestic political opposition to the present governments.

Important experiments in opening up political space are underway in Jordan and Kuwait, and until civil war erupted in 1994, a fascinating experiment in democratization was unfolding in Yemen. Incipient political openings in Algeria and Tunisia have been harshly reversed—in the first instance quite abruptly, while in the second the clamps are being applied somewhat more gingerly. A loosening of the clamps, driven by the need to liberalize the stagnant economy, has started in Syria, although one would have to be an incorrigible optimist to foresee very quick positive results on the political liberalization front. In neighboring Lebanon, the restoration of free political life remains a prospect under the leadership of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, although the intimidating influence of Damascus is not reassuring, nor are Mr. Hariri's anti-liberal tendencies. In non-Arab Iran, the revolution has come to an end, associational life is reviving and elections are technically fair, if still ideologically constricted. Meanwhile, in the Arab Gulf states incipient democracy movements are trying to find their footing, and rulers have rejoined by bestowing consultative councils (sing., *majlis al-shura*) in Bahrain, Oman and, most notably, in Saudi Arabia. At best, these

²I owe the term "national security state" to Shibley Telhami, who used it at the inaugural meeting of the Civil Society in Middle East program, held at Princeton University, in February 1992.

appointive bodies are several steps away even from inchoate legislatures, but the direction of change is not in dispute. These are small increments of change obviously, hardly major experiments in liberalization or democratization.

If western observers express cynicism about democracy's short term prognosis in the Middle East, many of those who govern these societies are acutely aware that business as usual is not the answer. Indeed, although the Algerian attempt to foster a multiparty democracy was badly flawed, and ended disastrously, other, less discouraging experiments are underway in Jordan and Kuwait. These latter experiments are little known in the West, except among specialists, and this lacuna in public debate illustrates why informed discussion could stand some stimulation.

In each case, non-democratic regimes have calculated recently that political reform is a good survival strategy, and, as a result, have fostered reasonably fair elections (twice, in the case of Jordan). The resulting discernible, if subtle improvement in political life contrasts dramatically to the majority of Arab states where elections are acts of compliant approval and contestation is rare.

While there is wide disagreement about the outcome, there has long been little doubt that the regimes in the region are under increasing pressure from their citizens. In some instances, rulers—prisoners of their own promises to lead their people to glory—are under siege from citizens no longer willing to buy empty promises or tolerate self-serving and incompetent officials. Repression at the hands of the state has become a topic of public discussion, and human rights activists, though still relatively few in number, have become increasingly vocal. In short, the region's governments, especially the Arab ones, are facing persistent crises of governance. None of this is meant to imply that all Middle East governments will choose the path of political reform, even less democratization. In some cases, those at the helm will stubbornly resist reform and even strive to turn back the clock, but it is hard to imagine that these tactics will succeed. Other leaders will attempt reform, and not because they wish to relinquish power, but because they seek to keep it. Some two dozen states comprise the Middle East. General predications can hardly account for the vagaries of leadership, the play of chance, or the disparate roles that external powers will fulfill. Nonetheless, the pressures for change are general and growing, although they are obviously not equally intense in all states.

The Gulf war of 1990-91 did not create or unleash the discontent and

the disdain that widely characterizes popular perspectives on government, but the war certainly accelerated the crisis by highlighting the inefficacy and the weakness of many of the regimes. Western pundits, particularly American ones, looked for eruptions in the street, and were reassured to find so few of them, but the impact of the war was more subtle than sound-bite profundities about the "Arab street" imply. In fact, pressures for change have been building steadily for almost three decades. The Gulf war provided a glimpse of the discontent and the routine repression of authoritarian governments that is usually masked from view. The war also exposed the divisive animosities that divide rich Arab states from poor ones, and put lie to the proposition that aid transfers, even generous ones, by the wealthier Arab states will sate popular discontent and anger.

Only in a handful of Middle East countries, notably Israel and less emphatically Turkey, is there a functioning, participant political system in which people vote regularly and meaningfully, where the freedom to speak freely is protected and where the rights of the individual enjoy significant respect. In many other instances, elections are shamelessly rigged, individual rights are pillaged and free association is prohibited. Time-honored remedies are still plied—co-opting critics, bribing recalcitrants with privileged access to power and to deals, locking up dissenters, and worse—but the scope of failure is so broad that few rulers have pockets deep enough or jails large enough to cope with the problem in the familiar ways. Even repression ceases to be effective at certain point, as Michael Hudson noted in 1988: "I would suggest that until recent years the costs of suppression have been lower than the costs of toleration, but that situation may be changing."³

The trends outlined here reflect global trends as well, especially the powerful demonstration effect of the momentous events in Europe since 1989. Middle Eastern autocrats have been no more successful in insulating their realms from the global revolution in communications, than autocrats in Africa and Asia. The Middle East is bombarded with information. Moreover, as Alan Richards succinctly argues here, the flow of information is part and parcel of the free market and to try to stifle that flow would be a fool's errand for any state pursuing economic liberalization. Even without the penetration of the electronic media or the fax machine, hundreds of thousands of labor migrants, moving back

³ Michael C. Hudson, "Democratization and the Problem of Legitimacy in Middle East Politics," Presidential address of the Middle East Studies Association, 1987, *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 22 (1988): 157-171, quotation from p. 165.

and forth across the region, carry powerful images of change and dissent. The new language of politics in the Middle East talks about participation, cultural authenticity, freedom and even democracy. No doubt, the defining flavor of the 1990s is participation.⁴ Like Coca Cola, "democracy" needs no translation to be understood virtually everywhere, yet the vocabulary of democracy is more succinct than the institutional variations that democracy may assume. There is no reason to presume, a priori, that one variant or another of western democracy is especially adaptable to the other locales. Instead, scholars must be alert to the possibility that the Middle East will evolve its own characteristic style of democracy, no doubt with an Islamic idiom in some instances.

Although skeptics abound, the last few years have seen a striking amount of speculation and discussion of the prospects for political liberalization in the Middle East, and particularly in the Arab world. Middle East rulers are talking, in cautious tones to be sure, about the need to renovate their political systems. Granted, their view of political change often amounts to little more than democracy by decree. Neither Thomas Paine nor Thomas Jefferson would be much impressed, but we need not belabor the arrogance of imposing an exogamous ideal-typical model of democracy. By now, it should be transparent that there is no single template for political reform in a region as diverse as the Middle East. A cynic might conclude that the goal, especially in those states in dire economic straits, is simply to spread the blame for failed economic policies, for spectacular rates of unemployment and underemployment, and for inadequate public services. Certainly, the discovery of a democratic vocabulary does not stem from idealistic conversion, but from pragmatic conclusions about the need to relieve pressure and vent political steam, as well as the shrewd recognition that democratization wins international favor. The result may look more like Singapore than New York, but that is not a choice to be made here.

Some political leaders have been willing to liberalize, but none has been willing to comprehensively democratize. Liberalization refers to reformist measures to open up outlets for the free expression of opinion, to place limits on the arbitrary exercise of power, and to permit political association. In contrast, democratization, namely, freely contested elections, popular participation in political life and—bluntly—the unchaining of the masses, has not occurred. Indeed, the electoral successes of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria, and the disastrous spiral of

⁴ As Albert Hourani noted in a letter to this writer in 1991.

events since the coup d'état of January 1992, have doubtlessly reinforced the anxiety that open elections inspire in the minds of people practiced in thwarting dissent and untutored in the contesting of genuinely open elections.⁵ At the same time, Arab intellectual elites who previously emphasized the imperative of democratization have now discernibly cooled on the project fearing that home grown Islamists would replicate the electoral successes of FIS, and would therefore offer the prospect of replacing one variety of authoritarian rulers with another. The grounds for these fears needs to be addressed, of course, and the basic issues are introduced in this chapter.

The Authoritarian Paradox

Why are authoritarian governments prevalent in the Middle East? Culturalist explanations leave us with a very pessimistic picture of societies condemned to despotism by virtue of deep-seated patterns of endogamy, patriarchalism and patrimonialism, or by virtue of the pervasive influence of Islam. Jill Crystal reminds us however, that the question is not simply the absence of democracy, but the presence of authoritarianism with its signature institutions of oppression and control, its ideology and its underlying political economy.⁶

Until recently, the comparative political history of Middle East governments has been a story of attempts to mobilize support and instill legitimacy around the notion of political unity and the imperative of social solidarity.⁷ Leading examples include Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir's experimentation with mobilization politics in Egypt, particularly through the Arab Socialist Party, and Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi's ventures in political party creation, aptly described as pseudo-participation.⁸ These efforts failed.

Notwithstanding the ruler's emphasis on creating unity and solidarity, the paradox is that the result has been actually the opposite, namely that such socially familiar and divisive forms of association, as family, clan and sect, have become a refuge in times of peril and the only secure base for structuring even modest political action. Thus, ancient hatreds

⁵ Volume II of this set will contain John Estelis' study on Algeria.

⁶ Jill Crystal has developed this theme in "Authoritarianism and Its Adversaries in the Arab World," *World Politics* 46, no. 2 (January 1994): 262-289.

⁷ See John Waterbury and Alan Richards, *A Political Economy of the Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), esp. the chapter on "solidarism," pp. 330-52.

⁸ For a well-crafted treatment of pseudo-participation see Jerrold D. Green, *Revolution in Iran* (New York: Praeger, 1980).

and timeworn claims do not persist because people in these societies reject more inclusive, more participant forms of government, but because their present authoritarian governments breed exclusivity and thwart open participation. In short, authoritarianism and sectarianism, and other social particularisms, go hand in hand.⁹ In his chapter on Syria, Raymond Hinnebusch generalizes about authoritarian-populist regimes: "While they exercise their power through the military and bureaucracy, they lack a stable social base in a dominant class (aristocracy or bourgeoisie) and, therefore, substitute the use of primordial (kinship, ethnic, regional) 'asabiyyah and patronage to assure elite solidarity and the deployment of Leninist party organization and corporatist association to incorporate a popular constituency."¹⁰

Civil Society in the Middle East

The symbol of democracy is the contested election and the secret ballot. This is altogether understandable, since the right to cast a meaningful ballot free of coercion is a metaphor for a participant political system. But, democracy does not reside in elections. If democracy—as it is known in the West—has a home, it is in civil society, where a mélange of associations, clubs, guilds, syndicates, federations, unions, parties and groups come together to provide a buffer between state and citizen.¹¹ Although the concept of civil society is resistant to analytical precision, the functioning of civil society is literally and plainly at the heart of participant political systems.

In fact, the icon of the global trend of democratization is civil society. In the face of repression in Latin America, Eastern and Southern Europe, civil society is sometimes credited with thwarting authoritarian designs and challenging arbitrary rule. Nonetheless, civil society did not topple regimes, as much as the regimes crumbled from internal corruption and hollow claims for legitimacy. Civil society was more the beneficiary than the wrecking ball. Moreover, civil society is often idealized as an unmitigated good thing. Like any social phenomenon, civil society can, and, often, does have, a negative side. Self-interest, prejudice and hatred

⁹ For a compelling polemical development of this argument see Samir al-Khalil (Kanaan Makiya), *The Republic of Fear* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch, in this volume, p. 239.

¹¹ This definition of civil society, though developed independently, is similar to the one offered by Bryan S. Turner, "Orientalism and the Problem of Civil Society in Islam," Asaf Hussain, Robert Olson, and Jamil Qurishi, eds., *Orientalism, Islam, and Islamists* (Brattleboro, VT: Amana Books, 1984), p. 27.

cohabit with altruism, fairness and compassion, and the unrestrained free play of civil society is a chilling thought, not a warm and fuzzy one.

Civil society speaks in a myriad of voices. The vanguard of civil society has been human rights activists, religiously-inspired protest movements, artists, writers and professional groups of lawyers, doctors or engineers who insist on governmental accountability and thereby expose the excesses and the weaknesses of authoritarian rulers. There is no denying the awe-inspiring courage that must be summoned to speak out, to demonstrate, to stand one's ground in circumstances where the policing apparatus is both ubiquitous and untethered by legal restrictions, where the sovereignty of the individual is a gift rather than a right.

Civil society is also grounded in a free economic market and the quest of the bourgeoisie for political differentiation from the state. As Simon Bromley notes, the rallying cry of the bourgeoisie has been liberalism not democracy, but the formation of a civil society is enabling for democracy.

[A] liberal civil society provides both the structural underpinning of representative democracy and the terrain on which an organized working class can develop. Historically, the latter have proved to be not capitalism's 'grave-diggers' but its democratizers.¹²

The fostering of civil society is a crucial step toward realizing a freer Middle East. One is hard pressed to design a participant political system which could survive very long in the absence of a vibrant civil society. In short, the existence of civil society is central to democracy.

However, civil society enthusiasts often contain their excitement when it comes to the Muslim world, and especially the Middle East. There, civil society is said to be deficient, corrupt, aggressive, hostile, infiltrated, co-opted, insignificant, or absent, depending on which observer one prefers to cite. For instance, in widely read essay, Ernest Gellner notes that Muslim societies "are suffused with faith, indeed they suffer from a plethora of it, but they manifest at most a feeble yearning for civil society."¹³

One way, an important way, of assessing the quality of political life in the Middle East is to inquire into the status of civil society there, to plumb their "yearning" for civil society. As Saad Eddin Ibrahim notes here, there has been impressive growth in associations since the mid-

¹² Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 167.

¹³ Ernest Gellner, "Civil Society in Historical Context," *International Social Science Journal*, no. 129 (August 1991), p. 506.

1960s to the late 1980s. During this period the numbers grew from 20,000 to 70,000. Of course, only a minority are active and effective. Ibrahim cites a recent study in Egypt showing that 40% of registered associations are actually viable. Among the interesting blossomings of civil society is the emergence of political parties, including 46 in Algeria, 43 in Yemen, 23 in Jordan, 19 in Morocco, 13 in Egypt, 11 in Tunisia, and 6 in Mauritania. But, far more important are the professional syndicates (*niqabat*) which have sometimes given shape to politics. In Sudan, the professional associations effectively overthrew the government in both 1964 and 1985. Significantly, the present Islamist-cum-military government of Sudan rushed to regulate and stifle syndicates, apparently to preclude a reprise. In Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, the syndicates have often been potent players, not least because of their linkage to international counterparts that enable them to enlist moral protection from abroad.

If, as we assume here, a vital and autonomous civil society is a necessary condition of democracy (though not a sufficient one), what does the present status of Middle East civil society portend? More fundamentally, does civil society exist in the Middle East?¹⁴ Many observers are doubtful that civil society, particularly in the Arab world, is sufficiently diverse or mature to lend durability to open, participant systems.

Moreover, a number of respected scholars have expressed skepticism that vibrant, autonomous civil societies will soon emerge in the Arab countries, considering the statist economies that stifle free association and the intolerance of populist Islamist movements. In the Middle East, and particularly in the Arab states, democracy has been bestowed rather than won, and, as the Algerian example illustrates, the gift may be revoked. Gudrun Krämer's comment is to the point:

The experiments in controlled liberalization that have occurred so far seem to be notable for the absence of what are commonly regarded as basic socioeconomic, political and cultural prerequisites of liberal democracy, such as involvement of broad sectors of "civil society," government dependence on internal mobilization of resources rather than oil or political rent, and a stable regional environment.¹⁵

Recent writings by leading scholars tends to endorse Krämer's skepticism.

¹⁴ The absence of a civil society to counter-balance despotic power was taken to be a marker of Oriental society by Karl Wittfogel in *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), and it is this lacuna that lies at the heart of the Orientalist analysis.

¹⁵ Gudrun Krämer, "Liberalization and Democracy in the Arab World," *Middle East Report*, no. 174 (January-February 1992), pp. 22-25, 35; quotation at p. 22.

John Waterbury refers to the "non-nurturing environment" of the Middle East¹⁶ and Michael Hudson reveals that he is more pessimistic than he was only a few years ago about the chances for democracy in the Middle East.¹⁷

Syria is a case in point. In his article here, Raymond Hinnebusch argues that economic liberalization in Syria is intended to broaden the regime's political base and to lift disabling economic controls stemming from Syria's failed statist experiment. Though the process is moving forward at a restrained pace, Hinnebusch notes that one result may be a more active civil society but not democracy. Syria's traditional merchants, until recently, were politically muffled and over-regulated. The merchants are benefiting from the economic reforms and are regaining influence in the process. In short, Hinnebusch is pointing to an increasing scope for civil society in Syria. These developments may have significant consequences for the stability of Syria when the inevitable moment of succession arrives. As Hinnebusch notes, it is unlikely that the reemerging civil society will give rise to pressures for democracy. The Syrian regime has grounded its legitimacy in the peasantry and the working class, and the promotion of democracy would, Hinnebusch surmises, enliven anti-capitalist populist forces. Although analysts prone to essentialist arguments posit a post-Hafiz al-Asad struggle along sectarian lines, Hinnebusch's argument points to a different logic of competition. The strata of the society that has benefited from Syria's state dominated economy will be at odds with the revived merchant class.

There is no disguising the western origins of the civil society concept, but the lineage of the concept should be largely irrelevant. The idea of civil society is potent analytically insofar as it exposes an important array of research questions. Applying the concept in the Middle East is not an exercise in imposing alien social values on the region, any more than exploring aspects of religiosity can be construed as proselytizing. For policymakers, activists, politicians and others committed to the buttressing or building of civil society, the study of civil society is unlikely to uncover a magic formula or reveal surefire prescriptions.

¹⁶ John Waterbury, "Democracy without Democrats? The Potential for Political Liberalization in the Middle East," in Ghassan Salamé, ed., *Democracy without Democrats?* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 1994), pp. 23-47.

¹⁷ Compare Hudson's "Democratization and the Problem of Legitimacy in Middle East Politics," *MESA Bulletin* 22, no. 2 (December 1988): 157-171, to his August 1992 testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, August 1992.

Instead, the contribution is a more fundamental one, namely to provide an outline image of Middle East civil society without getting bogged down, unnecessarily, in post-modernist obfuscation or ideal-typical fixations.

One deft appreciation of civil society has stressed the historical specificity of the concept, while expressing doubt that the idea of civil society can travel much beyond western Europe and the United States, but this conclusion smacks of a familiar problem: a confusion of the ideal-typical and with the real world.¹⁸ Certainly, the reality of civil society in the West, often contrasts sharply with ideal-typical civil society. Recent examples from eastern and central Europe, as well as from some quarters of the developing world, counsel that a categorical rejection of the idea of civil society in the Middle East is unwarranted, not least because the idea of civil society is fast becoming part of the indigenous intellectual and policy dialogues.

The existence of a civil society implies a shared sense of identity, by means of, at least, tacit agreement over the rough boundaries of the political unit. In a word, citizenship, with associated rights and responsibilities, is part and parcel of the concept. Citizenship underpins civil society. To be a part of the whole is a precondition for the whole to be the sum of its parts. Otherwise, society has no coherence, it is just a vessel filled with shards and fragments. Thus, the individual in civil society is granted rights by the state, but, in return, acquires duties to the state. All governments, but particularly autocracies, tend to trivialize citizenship, emphasizing displays of citizen support and patriotic ceremonies, while paying only lip service to the rights of citizenship.¹⁹ Where the state, through its depredations and failures has lost the loyalty of its citizens, citizenship is an early casualty. As legitimacy crumbles, civil society threatens to fragment as well. It is meaningless to speak of civil society in the absence of the state.

Civil society is more than an admixture of various forms of association, it also refers to a quality, civility, without which the milieu consists of feuding factions, cliques, and cabals. Civility implies tolerance, the willingness of individuals to accept disparate political views and social

¹⁸ Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

¹⁹ This observation is borrowed from Guillermo O'Donnell and Phillippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 48.

attitudes; to accept the profoundly important idea that there is no right answer.²⁰ I would like to emphasize that it is as relevant to look for civility within associations as it is to observe it between them. Ironically, groups which espouse democracy and other commendable values often do not exemplify these values internally.

Thus, a robust civil society is more than letterhead stationery, membership lists, public charters and manifestoes. Civil society is also a cast of mind, a willingness to live and let live. The antithesis of civility was grimly revealed by a gunman arrested in the June 1992 killing of Farag Fouda, the Egyptian secularist and critic of Muslim fundamentalism: "We had to kill him, because he attacked our beliefs."²¹

Unfortunately, civility is a quality which is missing in large parts of the Middle East. As Mustapha Kamil al-Sayyid observes in his cogent article, even in Egypt, widely revered for an active associational life, civil society is undermined by a deficit in political toleration and constricted by arbitrary government regulation. The absence of civility counsels skepticism about the short-term prospects for democracy in the region; however, if the art of association, as de Tocqueville called it, can be learned, then the promotion of civil society is no less than the creation of the underpinnings of democracy.

When groups and movements do emerge they often come in the form of human rights and women's movements. Both assert fundamental moral claims, namely the dignity of the person and the equality of the individual. Since the claims of such groups are truly basic ones, they are not easily assailed, at least explicitly, by the authorities of the state. Accordingly, they may enjoy more freedom of action than political opposition forces, or those groups which wish to affect the allocation of economic resources. These groups may also be less susceptible to co-optation, since their demands may not easily be assuaged by privilege, position or cash.

Though elements of civil society are likely to stand in opposition to the government, government must play the essential role of referee, rule-maker and regulator of civil society. Civil society, it needs to be emphasized, is no substitute for government. All too often, there is a

²⁰ See the timely essay by Edward Shils, "The Virtue of Civil Society," *Government and Opposition* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 3-20.

²¹ *The Economist*, June 13, 1992, p. 40.

tendency to commend civil society as a panacea, but the evidence is compelling that the state has a key role to play.

Democratization is neither the outright enemy nor the unconditional friend of state power. It requires the state to govern civil society neither too much nor too little, while a more democratic order cannot be built through state power, it cannot be built *without* state power.²²

Influenced by the events in Europe, some scholars have widely asserted that civil society is the natural enemy of autocracy, dictatorship and other forms of arbitrary rule. For instance, examining Eastern European cases, Giuseppe Di Palma argues that civil society is an organic part of democratic systems, but that it is in opposition to absolutist regimes by definition.²³

Yet, it is naive to expect civil society to topple the state. The interface between government and civil society will often be defined by cooperation rather than conflict. As Michael Bratton emphasizes, we need to be alert to the "more subtle strategies" that may be adopted, especially in non-democratic settings.

Just as we require a framework that enables us to account for citizen engagement as well as disengagement, we need to leave room for engagement between state and society that may be congruent as well as conflictual. And from a practical point of view, we cannot realistically expect fledgling civic associations to shoulder the onerous burden of opposition in a context where state elites are prone to equate opposition with disloyalty and treason. More subtle strategies than direct confrontation are required.²⁴

Government remains crucial to the project of political reform in the Middle East, and political reform is vital to insure stability; not stability in any static sense, since it is obvious that the problems that plague governments—inefficacy, faltering legitimacy, and corruption—cannot be wished away. Instead, projects of reform must instill a dynamic stability and that means civil society must have room to breathe.

Given the integral central connection between civil society and democracy, the long-term prospects for successful democratization in Lebanon, Egypt and Iran may be better than is commonly assumed. Moreover, while the Palestinians lack a state, there are, as Muhammad Muslih notes, the stirrings of a vibrant civil society. Whatever political entity finally emerges on the West Bank and in Gaza, there is a sound

²² John Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 23.

²³ Giuseppe Di Palma, "Legitimation from the Top to Civil Society: Politico-Cultural Change in Eastern Europe," *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (October 1991): 49-80.

²⁴ Michael Bratton, "Beyond the State: Civil Society and Associational Life in Africa," *World Politics* 41, no. 3 (April 1989): 407-430, quotation at p. 418.

basis for attributing to the Palestinians a high potential for developing a participant political system. Elsewhere the prospects are more problematic, if not bleaker. In Iraq, civil society has been systematically decimated. Although in the Kurdish region associational life, if not civil society, has been rejuvenated, it is hard to imagine a durable participant system taking root in the entire country any time soon.

Ironically, the best opportunity to create a vibrant civil society may come in those states widely viewed as "traditional" or "backward." In cases where the state has not erected elaborate mechanisms for control and intimidation, nor fostered an enormous bureaucracy or a massive state elite, political development may follow different paths, though it is important not to underestimate the coercive power of even "weak" states. Yemen is an illustration. On the one hand, elements in proto-civil society—notably, some women's groups showed real vitality and assertiveness. Moreover, Yemen's strong tribal formations formulated quasi-liberal political demands upon government. In the run-up to the 1993 elections, when the government showed signs of attempting to shirk balloting, tribal "conventions"—sometimes involving 10,000 or more participants—assembled to insist that the electoral process go forward and also enumerated demands upon the government of the nascent unified Yemen. Until dashed in the spring of 1994, when heavy fighting erupted between the autonomous militaries of northern and southern Yemen, hopes rang high for the democratization experiment that began with the unification of the two Yemens in 1990. The elections were relatively fair and no party won a clear victory. As a result only a coalition government could successfully rule. Thus, the elections seemed to break the pattern of single party politics prevalent in the Arab world. The post-election period was marked by considerable violence, however, and despite the appearance of a fledgling civil society, clubs were once again trump. With the victory of the northern forces, and the preservation of a unified Yemen, authoritarian trends threaten to prevail.²⁵

No doubt, political change will follow a variety of paths in the Middle East, and reformist programs will no doubt suffer further reverses. In some cases, people will be led in circles, only to find themselves where they began. In others, the rulers will adopt what the Arabs call "facade democracy" (*dimuqratiyyah shikliyyah*), employing the vocabulary of democracy while continuing business as usual. Muddling through is an option, but the pressures to open up the political systems of the Middle

²⁵ This is the subject of Sheila Carapico's study, to appear in volume II.

East may not abate, and, if civil society continues to gain its footing, issues of accountability and performance will grow in importance.

Though the region continues to be marked by regular encroachments upon the dignity of individuals, the trajectory of Middle East politics is clearly toward an increased emphasis on the right of the individual to be free from the arbitrary abuse of the state. The evidence is still mixed, but it is sufficient to suggest that the time has come to stop talking about Middle East exceptionalism when we discuss the global trends.

Although judging from the press in the West one would think that the Islamist groups are the only opposition groups in town, the Islamists are only one component in an array of groups that populate civil societies in the Middle East. In rich and poor states alike, incipient movements of men and women are demanding—in one form or another—a voice in politics. Women's movements are on the leading edge, especially in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Kuwait, Turkey, Yemen and amongst the Palestinians. Businessmen's groups in Jordan and Egypt have assertively represented their own economic interests, while providing an organizational model adaptable to other purposes. In May 1992, organized labor toppled the government of Omar Karami in Lebanon and, later, an array of organizations boycotted and monitored parliamentary elections under Syrian tutelage.

Instructive vignettes illustrate the relevance of focusing on civil society. Admittedly, the state is not disappearing from view, and loyalties of kinship are not about to be eclipsed by secular organizations. Nonetheless, no understanding of the contemporary Middle East will be complete unless it takes into account the status of civil society in the region.

* In Lebanon, despite the accumulated destructive and financial power of the militias that reigned from 1975 to 1990, participants in civil society, such as the trade and professional unions, resisted the militia-populated war system and worked to thwart the fragmentation of Lebanon into sectarian enclaves. Large-scale public demonstrations for peace challenged the militias' claims to authentically represent the Lebanese.²⁶

* In Kuwait, one finds the most impressive civil society in the Arab Gulf states. In addition to a reasonably lively press, an array of professional associations and a number of cultural clubs, Kuwait offers two relatively unique components of civil society. The *diwaniyyah* is an

²⁶ Antoine Messara, "Civil Society against the War System: The Lebanese Case" (in Arabic), a paper presented at an International Peace Academy sponsored conference in Giza, Egypt, May 28-30, 1992.

essential element in Kuwaiti civil society. The *diwaniyyah* is a gathering place in leading citizens' homes where men gather to socialize and share views on a range of topics from sports to politics. The *diwaniyyah* is traditionally a male gathering, but (in recent years) some women have started their own *diwaniyyat*. It is well understood that no candidate for office could win election if he did not visit most, if not all, of the *diwaniyyat* of his district. When the Law of Gatherings prevented the holding of any meeting without prior permission from the authorities, the *diwaniyyat* were excluded. As Ghanim al-Najjar notes, Kuwait's pro-democracy movement started in a *diwaniyyah*.²⁷ In the period following the suspension of parliament in 1986, the *diwaniyyat* became centers of opposition activity. In effect, the *diwaniyyat* function as proto-parties in a political system where political parties are proscribed. Since the institution of the *diwaniyyah* is culturally engrained, the government is hard-pressed to shut them down. At best, government agents can report on the discussions that take place there.

Less well known is the cooperative, which proved instrumental as a superstructure for lending support to the resistance during the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. While the government quickly crumbled before the onslaught of the Iraqi invasion, the resistance found a firm footing in civil society. In 1990, as Neil Hicks and Ghanim al-Najjar report in their chapter here, there were over 170,000 subscribers in cooperatives, which were organized to meet a variety of consumer needs, especially purchases of food. In fact, the cooperative accounted for 80 percent of all food retailing. The structure of the cooperatives, with established financial systems, well-exercised roles and patterns of social interaction, lent itself to supporting the resistance, and since cooperatives pervaded Kuwaiti society, the Iraqis were hard-pressed to control them. Cooperatives, therefore, continued to function in the face of the Iraqi occupation. Moreover, serving on the board of a cooperative proved to be a good political apprenticeship—at least 19 members of the parliament elected in 1992 previously served on cooperative boards. It is also noteworthy that although women are denied the franchise to vote in national elections, they do vote in cooperative elections.

After the Iraqis were expelled, the democratic movement resonated even in Kuwaiti tribes where innovative primary elections produced anything but predictable results. In almost all cases, tribal chiefs lost the primary balloting to fellow tribesmen.

* Jordanian civil society truly found its voice during the Gulf crisis.

²⁷ Ghanim al-Najjar, "Civil Society in Kuwait," a paper presented at the International Peace Academy sponsored conference in Giza, Egypt, May 28-30, 1992, p. 12.

Professional associations in Jordan were very active in organizing congresses and demonstrations against the allies' actual goals of dominating the Arabian Gulf and of destroying Iraq, on the one hand, and in collecting donations to help Iraqis to face the blockade imposed over them on the other hand. In response to this, the Jordanian government had to respect the professional associations' stand over the Gulf crisis, even when their stand was, in some cases, against the official position of the government.²⁸

The Jordanian case helps to illustrate that the development of civil society will not necessarily evoke applause for western policies. Moreover, as Laurie Brand notes in her chapter on Jordan, the process of opening up space for civil society also threatens to widen existing cleavages, as between Palestinians and East Bankers.

Of course, since 1989, King Hussein has been experimenting with democracy. As Laurie Brand notes in this volume, "What is currently unfolding in Jordan, however exciting, is a liberalization process managed from above, part of a strategy intended to ensure the continuation of the monarchy." Parties were only legalized in 1992, and few are more than cliquish formations. (The Islamic Action Party is a major exception. This is the force—derived from the Muslim Brotherhood—that won 22 seats in 1989.) As Brand notes, only 1.4 percent of respondents, in a recent survey, reported membership in a party and only 6 percent anticipated joining a party. Far more important are the professional associations (*niqabat*)—the groupings of doctors, engineers, lawyers, dentists, pharmacists, journalists, writers, geologists, agricultural engineers that often articulate political positions, though they seldom directly challenge the government.

* In Jordan, as in other authoritarian settings, government strives to manipulate and control civil society. A familiar pattern is the creation of competing groups to challenge assertive autonomous associations. For instance, in both Jordan and Tunisia, women's groups have been created by the government expressly to dampen support for autonomous groups. In Yemen, the League of Human Rights was countered with a government-created alternative, which, as Sheila Carapico notes, held its first meeting in a police headquarters.

* The associations that comprise civil society often provide an outlet for the free expression of political ideas. In Tunisia,

the absence of free space for social and political expression [in state-dominated corporatist structures] meant that dissenting voices sought substitute political arenas in the union, the university, and the mosques, [and even in]

²⁸ 'Atef Odhibat, "Civil Society in Jordan: A Preliminary Assessment," a paper presented at an International Peace Academy sponsored conference in Giza, Egypt, May 28-30, 1992, p. 18.

cultural associations such as the Association of Cine clubs which later led to the formation of the most leftist weekly ever to appear in the country, *le Phare*.²⁹

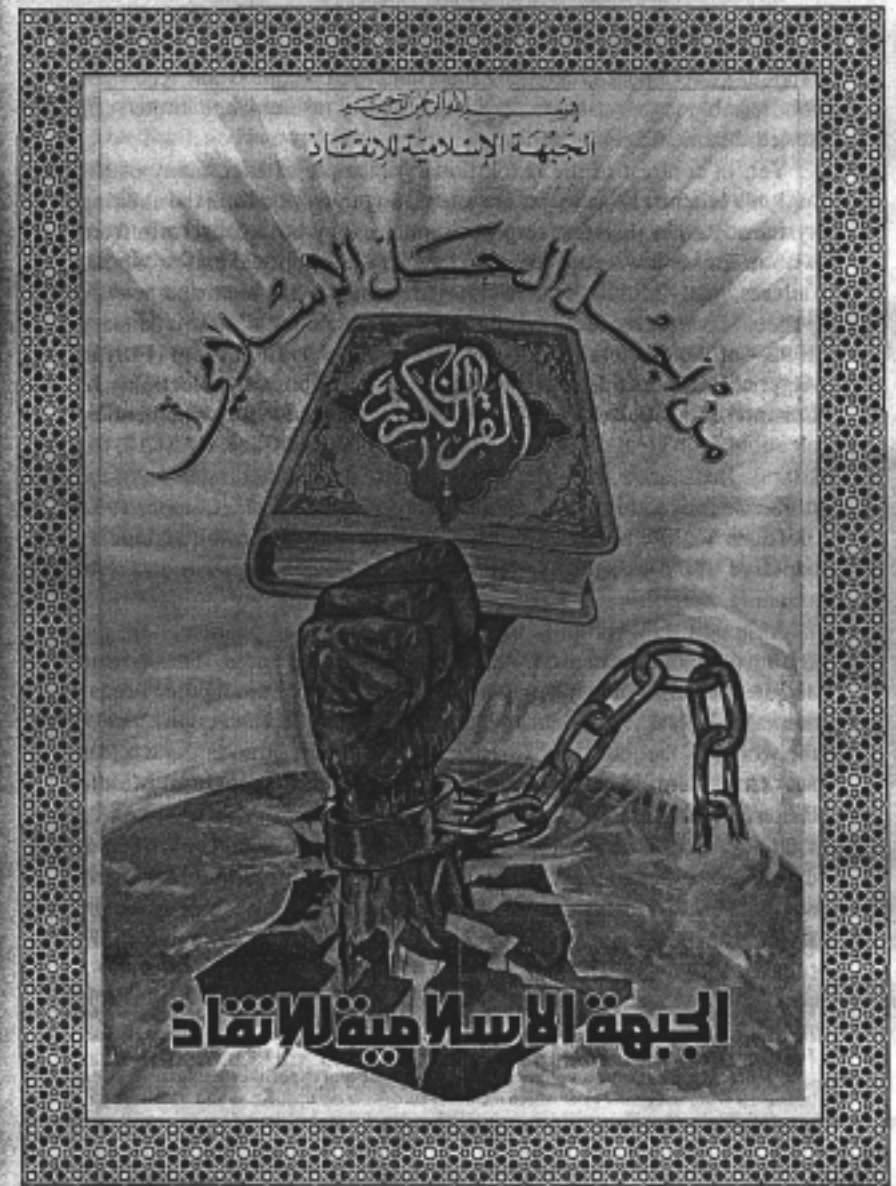
The government clamp down on the usually vibrant labor unions, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, coincided with a dramatic rise of an assertive Islamic movement, illustrating, yet once more, that repressive government has helped to create the space in which the populist Islamist movements have thrived. The Islamist bogey man provides regimes an excuse not to move toward more open contestation, while simultaneously keeping a tight lid on civil society.

In fact, civil society in Tunisia is penetrated, co-opted and controlled. The combination of state surveillance and financing insures that no one steps too far out of line. Parties are controlled and precluded from meaningful representation. Yet, Tunisia is promising in some ways. There has been an impressive blossoming of NGOs since 1988 with the number growing from 3,300 to more than 5,100 in 1994. As Eva Bellin notes, the Tunisian military is weak, the middle class is unusually large, literacy is relatively high (74 percent for males and 56 percent for females, which is well above the comparable figures for Iran, Iraq, or Egypt), incomes are comparatively high, and Tunisia spurned Arab socialism and followed instead a quasi-liberal path of development. The regime self-consciously promotes civility, but it also prefers control. Moreover, the state's commitment to the development of civil society has one major exception, namely the Islamists. For many Tunisian intellectuals—like intellectuals across the Middle East—the Islamist alternative only poses a choice between laic and theocratic authoritarianism.

Islamists and Political Reform

Across the Arab world, the clarion call of pan-Arabism, in its several variants, now often falls on deaf ears. The prevailing ideology of opposition in the Arab countries, as in the broader Middle East, is signaled by the simple claim made more and more frequently across the region, "Islam is the solution." If those occupying the seat of power are sometimes indecisive and on the defensive, the Islamist groups are neither. Islam is viewed by an active minority as an emerging, durable and appealing political ideology, as well as a defense against the encroachments of "western decay." Islamist movements are as notewor-

²⁹ Abdelbaki Hermassi, "Notes on Civil Society in Tunisia," a paper presented at an International Peace Academy sponsored conference in Giza, Egypt, May 28-30, 1992, pp. 7-8.



This FIS poster was created in 1991 for the parliamentary elections. Atop the poster is the *Basmala* ("In the name of God the merciful, the compassionate"), followed by "the Islamic Salvation Front" (*al-jabha al-islamiyyah li-inqadh*). The slogan arched over "the Blessed Qur'an" is "for the sake of the Islamic solution." The front's name is repeated at the bottom.

(Courtesy of Robin Wright)

thy in the secular Republic of Turkey as in the Sudan, where a militantly Islamic government challenges the cliché that Sunni Islam would be inhospitable to governments bearing a family resemblance to the self-styled Islamic Republic of Iran.

Yet, in contrast to the revolutionary example of Iran, many of the region's Islamist movements are attempting to work within the existing systems. Rather than toppling government, they push for reform from within. This is a wise approach. Whatever their political and economic failures, many Middle Eastern states are armed to the teeth and heavily policed. Even after the stunning reversal—the coup d'état in January 1992—of the electoral victory by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria, many Islamists elsewhere continue to push for elections. In Lebanon, Hizballah (Party of God), competed in the 1992 parliamentary elections with great success.³⁰ In the West Bank and Gaza, HAMAS, the Islamic Resistance Movement, has clearly signaled that it will compete in elections as an organized opposition to the PLO. In the October 1992 elections to fill the 50 seats of the parliament in Kuwait, Islamists captured about two-thirds of the seats won by the opposition in its stunning victory.³¹

Although they certainly represent a region-wide phenomenon, the Islamists are not a centrally-directed, monolithic force. This is true despite the persistent tendency in some quarters to promote the "fundamentalist" trend as a product of Iranian manipulation and control, as in the words of the journalist Charles Krauthammer: "Iran is the world's new Comintern."³² The legitimate concern of many thoughtful Middle Easterners is that the Islamic solution will turn out to be a variant of totalitarianism. One can hope that the realities of political life will tame their excesses, even make pragmatists of them, but such social experiments can be very painful, even if the predicted results eventually occur. Specialists are certainly right to emphasize Islamic concepts like *shura*

³⁰ Augustus Richard Norton and Jillian Schwodler, "Swiss Soldiers, Ta'if Clocks, and Early Elections: Toward A Happy Ending in Lebanon?" Deirdre Collings, ed., *Peace for Lebanon? From War to Reconstruction* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1994), pp. 45-65.

³¹ There is considerable disagreement about the number of opposition seats actually won, because it is not altogether clear which members constitute the opposition and which are pro-government. Contemporary press estimates claim that the opposition won as few as 19 seats and as many as 37. The strong representation of Islamists is not at issue.

³² Charles Krauthammer, "Iran to become new 'Evil Empire'?" *Democrat and Chronicle*, January 4, 1993 (Rochester, NY). Two days earlier, in a similar vein, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said: "We call on all nations, all peoples to devote their attention to the great danger inherent in Islamic fundamentalism." Quoted by Michael Parks, "Israel Sees Self Defending West Again," *Los Angeles Times*, January 2, 1993.

(consultation), *ijma'* (consensus), and *ba'ya* (affirmations of communal loyalty), but these concepts do not comprise a compelling theory of government. Moreover, there would be more comfort if *hurriyyah* (freedom), and *huquq al-insan* (human rights) received equal play in the discourse of Islamic populists.³³

In fact, skepticism amongst some western observers runs so deep that even the logic of their own arguments is overshadowed by the danger presumed inherent in the emerging social forces of Islamic populism. One widely read argument runs along the following lines:

>The Arab regimes are inefficient, often corrupt, and persistently unresponsive to the needs of the majority of their citizens;

>simultaneously, the regimes' legitimacy is eroding under the strains of the shattering of Arab unity, the end of the Cold war, and the move toward a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict;

>the force of populist Islam has moved into the void, and is capturing the social base that the regimes are losing by offering a dynamic ethos of change and reform, while simultaneously providing a basis for erecting a network of social services that the government does not provide;

>however, these political movements are inherently anti-western, anti-Israeli, anti-women and anti-democratic. Therefore, there is no sensible alternative for western governments save to oppose these movements and lend support to the corrupt, ineffective and widely-hated regimes.³⁴

This is a maliciously dangerous argument that could lead to precisely the sort of clashes of civilizations that leading conservative scholars like Samuel P. Huntington are predicting as the defining element of the post Cold-war world.

Therefore, it is imperative to examine the prospect that the Arab world is the asterisk, the exceptional case where societies are uncivil and where an emerging opposition force, namely the populist Islamist movements, is peculiarly inimitable to democracy. Should the global map of political change treat the Middle East as a land of fire-breathing anti-democrats? How can the prospects for tolerant and open political systems emerging there be assessed?

Consistently, the Islamists—skilled populists all—have dispensed promises more freely than programs, and there is certainly no evidence

³³ See John Esposito and James Piscatori, "Democratization and Islam," *Middle East Journal* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 427-440.

³⁴ Judith Miller, "The Challenge of Radical Islam," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 43-56.

that they hold the solutions to the vexing social and economic problems which plague many states in the region. Some—but not all, it is important to emphasize—of the Islamists are contemptuous, even hostile toward the idea of democracy, which is seen as socially divisive and endemically corrupt. Even more to the point, radical Islamist thinkers, such as the late Sayyid Qutb, argue that sovereignty belongs only to God and that any conception of popular sovereignty ascribes the power of God to others (*shirk*).³⁵ In point of fact, there is no question that democracy is rejected by *some* Islamists.

As Ahmad Moussalli argues in this volume, the rejection of democracy is not general to Islamists and he usefully distinguishes between the ideological perspectives of radicals and moderates. In fact, Moussalli establishes that there are categorical differences in the two perspectives, in particular around the construction of the institutions of consultation (*shura*). For the radicals, *shura* is an elite function of qualified *'ulama*. In contrast, the moderates entertain the idea that *shura* be construed more broadly as encompassing elections and parliamentary forms of representation. This dichotomy is a very important one that is often ignored even in scholarly writing on the Islamists, or, if not ignored then either dismissed as a ploy or minimized on the grounds that the radical perspective will necessarily prevail.³⁶

In other respects, Islamist ideologies share a conception of state-society relations that contrasts with the familiar liberal view. For secular liberals, the state plays a crucial role in protecting the rights of citizens and in regulating the excesses of society. In contrast, while the Islamists do not advocate a vanishing state, they posit a state that is subordinate to society, and is effectively and appropriately the creature of society. This view of state-society relations has obviously negative ramifications for the protection of minority interests and the protection of some individual rights, particularly, the expression of political dissent as well as tolerance for religious diversity.

Gudrun Krämer's incisive summary of the moderate perspective, i.e., the Islamist mainstream, is to the point:

The mainstream position is remarkably flexible with respect to modes of political organization, providing for institutionalized checks on the ruler in the form of a separation of powers, parliamentary rule, and in some cases even multipartyism. It is more advanced than is often acknowledged concerning the

³⁵ Sayyid Qutb, *Ma'ālim fi al-Tarīq* (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 7th ed., 1980).

³⁶ The latter conclusion is developed by Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

protection of human rights, which are generally founded on the duties towards God but nevertheless widely seen as part of the common heritage of all humankind. Indeed, the protection of individual rights and civil liberties from government supervision and interference, repression and torture figures highly on Islamist agendas. But mainstream attitudes remain highly restrictive with regard to the freedom of political, religious and artistic expression, if that involves the right to freely express one's religious feelings, doubts included, and even to give up Islam altogether.³⁷

Politics is, by definition, contingent upon choices and opportunities. To assume otherwise is simply silly. Thus, it is imperative to consider empirical evidence to test the proposition that there actually is a categorical distinction between moderates and radicals.

To argue that popular political players are irremediably intransigent and therefore unmoved by events in the real world is simply foolish. But first, a word is also in order on the distinction between Islamist elites and followers. Because the work of influential writers working in the Orientalist tradition is textual, by definition, they expend little effort looking at the incentives of the Islamist rank and file.³⁸ Moreover, because they work out of culturally and historically essentialist concepts of Islam they miss the fungibility of popular participation in the Islamist movements. Those moved by the call are—it is true—responding to a culturally authentic and familiar ideology, but they are also making rational choices, for instance, for good health care. Without minimizing the revival of religiosity amongst Muslims, there is no question that the network of private voluntary organizations (PVOs) under the wings of Islamists have cemented and enlisted support among believers. Popular support for these movements is mobile. This means that reductions in Islamist social welfare and health activities will lead to a reduction in popular support especially if comparable or superior services are elsewhere available. Of course, for the foreseeable future, financially-strapped and bureaucratically-unwieldy governments, in Egypt for instance, are unlikely to be able to compete nose-to-nose with the Islamist PVOs.

A fundamentally important question is whether experiments in democracy (as are now underway in Jordan and Kuwait) will domesticate the populist Islamists movements. Put another way, does participation in the political process instill pragmatism and a political logic of give-and-take that will slake all but the most ardent true believer? The

³⁷ Gudrun Krämer, "Islamist Democracy," *Middle East Report*, no. 183 (July-August 1993), pp. 2-8, quotation from p. 8.

³⁸ Distinguished practitioners of this approach include Elie Kedourie and Bernard Lewis.

evidence is mixed, but instructive. In Jordan, Kuwait and Yemen, recent elections have brought Islamists into the political process, and in each of these cases leading Islamist politicians have proved willing to play by the rules. This points up that the very decision to participate in elections opens up the ideological cleavage between radicals and moderates, and thereby creates conditions for the formation of new alliances and coalitions. This dynamic process might aptly be called constructive divisiveness.

Of course skeptics marshal the case of Algeria, where the 1991 election—the rules of which were designed to magnify the victory of the ruling party—instead magnified the popularity of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). FIS was on the verge of seizing power until it was thwarted by a coup in January 1992. However FIS might have behaved once in power, and experts disagree profoundly, no quantity of *ex post facto ergo propter hoc* arguing will alter the simple fact that FIS won the election and that its victory was stolen from it. Invoking the post-coup anti-regime violence mounted by FIS is quite literally beside the point. Thus, the Algerian case tells us little about political behavior in reformist contexts, and much about how poorly designed elections can lead to unsettling results.

So long as the Islamist movements are given no voice in politics, there can be no surprise that their rhetoric will be shrill and their stance uncompromising. In contrast, well-designed strategies of political inclusion hold great promise for facilitating essential political change. The pace of change is obviously crucial. All too often, the great difference between governments wrought of revolution and those wrought of reform is neglected. This fact, even more than sectarian or ethnic differences, distinguishes the present regime in Iran from its counterparts in the Arab world. Revolutions bring with them a new class of rulers and a reconstruction of the political order, while reform is by definition incremental and familiar.

One promising example is provided by Jordan, where an important experiment in political reform is underway. King Hussein of Jordan argues that democratization is the only answer to ensuring political stability, and he chastises his fellow rulers for viewing democratic reform "as a luxury they cannot afford."³⁹ Notwithstanding the monarch's peroration, Arab rulers do have choices ranging from squashing dissent and co-opting potential opponents to political liberalization and

³⁹ Quoted by Associated Press, 29 April, 1993.

democratization. If some Middle Eastern states trod the path of democratization, others will remain mired in autocracy.

Meanwhile, essentialists, even highly readable ones like Ernest Gellner, argue that civil society has no home in Muslim society where *din wa dawla* (religion and state) purportedly know no separation and where the very notion of secular society is anathema. (The presence of liberal Islamist forces is pretty much downplayed if not ignored by Gellner.) Not so long ago, the absence of democracy in the Middle East was put down to the existence of the authoritarian states and weak societies deficient in associational life and lacking a sense of public space.⁴⁰ Now, with the emergence of the Islamist movements, as Yahya Sadowski notes critically, the explanation shifts to one emphasizing that Middle East societies are so strong that they are in danger of the overpowering the state.⁴¹ Essentialists may, it seems, have it both ways. Other writers, such as Şerif Mardin, have emphasized the historical specificity of civil society, and its roots in the West. The empirical record makes precisely the opposite point. Otherwise, how does one account for the relatively rapid emergence of civil society in Turkey, where to emerge democracy did not really begin until 1950?

Most important, though scholars of the Middle East may debate civil society existentially, theoretically, conceptually, normatively, and ontologically, the simple fact is that civil society is today part of the political discourse in the Middle East. Scholastic debates notwithstanding, civil society is the locus for debate, discussion, and dialogue in the contemporary Middle East.

⁴⁰ Fuad Khuri, "Invisible Meanings in Conflict Resolution: Some Macro-Ideological Constructs in Arab-Islamic Culture," a paper presented at an American University of Beirut-sponsored meeting in Lamaca, Cyprus, June 24-26, 1993; and Yahya Sadowski, "The New Orientalism and the Democracy Debate," *Middle East Report*, no. 183 (July-August 1993), pp. 14-21, and p. 40.

⁴¹ Sadowski, "The New Orientalism."