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The Political Reform Debate in the Middle East and North Africa

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Table of Contents

New Life to the Arab Reform Debate 3

Priorities of and Approaches to Political Reform 3

Perspectives on External Involvement: EU vs. US? 4

A New Era 6

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New Life to the Arab Reform Debate

Against the background of the September 11 attacks, the United States' ***Greater Middle East Initiative***, amended into the ***Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative*** after its approval at the G8 Summit in June 2004, has put new life into the debate on political reform in the Arab region. It triggered a series of mainly official responses such as the ***Sana'a Declaration*** in January 2004 and the ***Tunis Declaration*** by the League of Arab States in May 2004. While it should be noted that the reform debate has been going on for decades already, these days the discussion takes place on all levels within Arab societies, among politicians, intellectuals, official and non-governmental institutions alike.

Hence this overview aims at presenting the current debate beyond the official statements, as it is held among ideologically and politically diverse Arab writers and intellectuals in Arabic newspapers and journals. The articles incorporated reflect the divergent views within Arab societies today with regard to the priorities of political reform and the perspectives on external involvement. Since a culture of renowned Arabic periodicals as a forum for a specialist debate does not exist, the articles were taken from regional media sources such as the newspapers ***Al-Hayat*** and ***Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*** and a couple of Lebanese and Egyptian journals.

Priorities of and Approaches to Political Reform

The participants in the debate hold differing views as regards the fundamental approaches to and the basic concept of reform. The role of civil society and its relation to the state is a major topic in the discussion. According to **Ghassan Salamé**, former Lebanese minister of culture and a professor at the University of Paris, attaining reform falls under a single headline: devising a new social contract between state and society in the Arab world. For this, Salamé offers several formulas in his article "Towards a New Contract between State and Society." Above all, a comprehensive reform process should encompass fundamental economic and social reforms, Salamé argues. An essential and tangible aspect of a new social contract would be the introduction of a taxation system which is thought to ensure the requisite trust for any reform initiative. Other suggestions, following the European example, aim at ensuring an effective League of Arab states and establishing a shared Arab market, thereby conceptually creating a new balance between state and market. Salamé also advocates youth and women empowerment to facilitate higher levels of development.

In his article "Reform from Within," **Usama Harb**, a member of the Shura Council and editor-in-chief of the quarterly ***Al-Siassa al-Dawlya*** (International Politics) published by the Egyptian ***Al-Ahram Center***, attempts to minimize and negate the foreign influence on reform from a more nationalist viewpoint. He emphasizes that reform should be instigated from within, a process which can be coordinated between the state and civil society. According to the writer, the division between pro-reformists and anti-reformists within society does not correspond to the division between governing and governed but rather crosscuts both sectors. This implies that the forces of reform also exist within governmental institutions. On a second level, the writer urges the reform advocates in the region to coordinate and cooperate so as to minimize the reform pressures being exerted from the outside. Finally, any reform process should express and be compatible with the cultural and religious values specific to each country.

Azmi Bishara, a Palestinian writer and Arab nationalist member of the Israeli Knesset, deplores the theoretical obscurity of the reform debate in his article "The Idol or 'Fetishism' of Reform." He discusses the importance of civil society and its role in the political reform process in the region, criticizing the mutation of concepts. In his view, the now dominant equation of civil society with NGOs obscures any clear understanding of the potentials of civil society in interacting with the state to engender democracy, thereby blocking the process of democratic transformation. According to Bishara the notion of reform, cleared of its proper definitions, has been misused as a tool to attain completely different objectives. Basically, he argues, it has become a banner under which conferences are held and money is circulated. Therefore, Bishara demands that genuine reform should entail removing administrative obstructions in the state apparatus and social and cultural obstacles to democratic transformation. This in turn requires a clear understanding of the main players and factors in the reform process, above all regarding the crucial role of civil society.

Similarly, in his article "Four More Years for Bush: Any Arab Work Plan?," **Hassan Munaimna**, a Lebanese

writer and a co-director of the Iraq Research and Documentation Project based at Harvard University, regards civil society as being primarily responsible for initiating a comprehensive Arab reform project. As goals of the reform process, he spells out the need to attain a political system based on civic freedoms, citizenship, separation of powers, democratic participation, popular representation, and transparency. Further priorities suggested include battling corruption, guaranteeing the non-politicization of the armed forces, and fostering the transition from a state based on coercion to a state genuinely concerned with social welfare.

Setting priorities differently, **Arfan Nizam al-Din**, a Lebanese journalist and writer, in his article "Reform According to the Way of Marie Antoinette" asserts that political reform cannot start without the resolution of the Middle East conflict. According to the author, a final, comprehensive, and just solution to the Middle East conflict enforcing the rights of the Palestinians and providing for the end of the occupation is a sine-qua-non condition for any regional reform effort. As a further prerequisite, he identifies the withdrawal of the American troops from Iraq and their replacement with international and Arab forces. These should work within a set time frame to restore stability and security in the country and assist in implementing a democratic system. Simultaneously, the struggle against terrorism should continue with tackling its sources. According to Nizam al-Din, all other national challenges, including unemployment, education, freedom of speech, and obliteration of corruption are to be treated as secondary problems.

In addition, the writer demands that the reforms should be advocated from within as opposed to any foreign dictation, while ensuring that they are reflective of the needs of the people and in accordance with Arab culture. Accordingly, Nizam al-Din refutes any form of foreign intervention on the basis of its incompatibility with Islamic beliefs and Arab culture and its detachment from regional conditions. External reform pressures, he maintains, only touch upon the façade rather than contribute to comprehensive solutions of the deep-rooted problems in the Arab world.

Perspectives on External Involvement: EU versus US?

Thus, the debate about political reform in the region today revolves around the external forces of change, particularly the American pressure. Albeit for very different reasons, most discussants agree on the repudiation of American intervention as an external reform factor. At the same time, external involvement is rarely perceived as American versus European. Instead, in most cases, Western intervention is equated with American interference. When the distinction is made, however, Europe is viewed as being a more credible and accepted partner in the reform process than the United States.

For example, in his article entitled "Rice Opened the Doors before Bush," **Arfan Nizam al-Din** urges the Arabs to invest in their relationship with Europe, arguing that the Europeans show a better understanding of Arab viewpoints and are more experienced with the political realities in Arab countries. The geographical proximity of both regions, he assumes, entails that the European Union may eventually border the Arab world following the EU accession of Turkey and Cyprus, which augurs a deepening of Arab-European relations. Apart from some reservations, Nizam al-Din regards European assistance as more credible and conducive to the Arab reform process.

Arguing divergently, in the above-mentioned article **Usama Harb** fundamentally rejects any form of imposed foreign intervention in the reform process except for requested assistance. The writer considers the external calls for reform to be destructive, fearing that they would trigger negative responses within Arab societies. Moreover, anti-reformists could take advantage of external reform pressures by defaming the internal advocates of reform as allies to the refuted external intervention. In accordance with Nizam al-Din's position, Harb states that reform initiatives are the duty of domestic forces who should be the primary agents of reform as they possess comprehensive knowledge of the respective conditions and the resulting priorities regarding their country.

From a normative idealist perspective, in his article "Towards a New Contract between State and Society," **Ghassan Salamé** sheds light on why in his view the US position as a contributor to the reform process is generally revoked and lacks credibility in Arab societies. The disregard for international law, violation of human rights, and breaching of international protocols

place the United States, as the writer puts it, in the "suspicion booth." Thus, the American demands on the region to respect ethical values and conventions, which the US administration itself disregards, present its position as being blatantly hypocritical, Salamé argues. Consequently, American interference is rejected by all forces within society, pro-reformists and anti-reformists alike.

In similar vein, in his article referred to above, **Azmi Bishara** considers US calls for reform to be an obstacle to "genuine reform" in the region. This notion is to purport a process of democratic transformation in contrast to a mere "ornamental" reform which he claims is advocated by the United States. This implies that recent regional developments show a clear consensus among the US and Arab leaderships on merely implementing a few façade changes which actually perpetuate the rule of the current elites. Therefore, the only way to conceive of successful reform is to generate root changes to the ruling elite, the author concludes.

In a more elaborated manner, in his article "Façade Democracy: The Extent of Western Demands to the Arab Leaderships" **George Tarabishi**, a Syrian writer and editor-in-chief of the ***Dirassat Arabia*** (Arabic Studies) journal, criticizes the way Western democracies befriend despotic Arab regimes. Nevertheless, Tarabishi refrains from condemning the West per se to be hypocritical for two reasons. First, he puts forward that there simply exist two "versions" of the West — European and American — which assume different roles and approaches. Second, he concedes that generally the Western position has become more assertive toward its despotic Arab allies since the September 11 attacks, resulting in a geo-strategic transformation in Western policies. Nevertheless, to Tarabishi it is still evident that as long as the interests of the West are fulfilled, Arab regimes are not forced to pursue democratic transformation.

According to the author, there are two kinds of Arab despotism, one which is hostile to the West and hence rejected — as was the case in Iraq — and another one which is loyal to the West and accepted, as in the case of Tunisia. Accordingly, the recent case of Libya regaining Western appreciation through merely changing its foreign policy instead of domestic politics in his view has shown that none of the despotic political systems in the Arab world is confronted with real pressure to allow for political change. Instead, these regimes are simply expected to adjust to a Western — and particularly American — political agenda, Tarabishi contends.

In his article "Bye Bye Reforms" **Faisal al-Qassim**, an anchorman on ***Al-Jazeera*** TV, maintains that reform is only feasible through an interplay of external and internal factors. In his opinion, those who claim that reform only emanates from within simply advocate the perpetuation of despotic Arab leaderships. On the other hand, external involvement would not be revoked, he supposes, if calls for reform were genuine. However, the American demands fall short of incentives for extensive change, such as confronting human rights violations and the removal of despotic authoritarian regimes. To strengthen his argument, al-Qassim contrasts the American support for political change in Eastern Europe in 1989–90 with the US approach toward the Arab region today. Although he concedes that certainly American interests were involved in the case of the Eastern European countries, these eventually benefited from US involvement by becoming EU members after the abolition of their communist regimes. Yet while today the US administration rhetorically encourages regime change similar to the Eastern European "white revolutions," it simultaneously supports and stabilizes the despotic Arab regimes de facto to safeguard its own interests. Therefore, the Eastern European scenario of a gentle regime change is not transferable to the Arab world, al-Qassim concludes.

A more affirmative perspective is put forward by the former Yemeni foreign minister **Abdallah al-Asnaj** in his article "Are the Arabs Playing with Lost Time?". He encourages cooperation between the United States and Arab states to instigate the process of democratic reform in the region. Al-Asnaj criticizes the condemnation of the American calls for reform. He claims that the reason for such criticism does not lie in the direction or credibility of American policies. Rather, he assumes, it is to be found in the absence of a comprehensive consensual and self-initiated Arab reform project. Consequently, al-Asnaj argues for the necessity to adapt to the changes in international politics and to obey the rules of the international game as dictated by the United States. Furthermore, he advocates strengthening the relations with Washington while taking into account the regional capabilities and circumstances, in order to begin advancing reform from within.

Along the same line of argument, in his article referred to above **Hassan Munaimna** states that political reform is simply inevitable. The only two options to

choose from include a reform based on a work plan which places the common and specific Arab interests on top of the list, or a reform project which is confined to meeting American and other foreign demands. Thus, external intervention is not necessarily encouraged but is still seen as inevitable.

Arguing for a more pragmatic perspective in his article "Free at Last through an Arab-Western Joint Venture," **Rami Khoury**, editor-in-chief of the Lebanese English-language newspaper ***The Daily Star***, affirms that the debate between those in the Arab world who have argued that reform can only come from within and others who have been arguing for strong pressure from abroad may eventually be in vain. In light of recent promising events such as the elections in Iraq and the Palestinian territories and the popular movement in Lebanon, Khouri considers it more important "to focus on what needs to be done by all concerned parties, rather than argue about who started the ball rolling. We both did. Let's keep it rolling, so that all Arabs, like their counterparts in other lands, can be free at last."

A New Era

There is indeed a lot of discussion taking place concerning the political reformation of the region. However, as this overview shows, the problem appears to be that the debate on political reform is held in a rather abstract manner, often centering on conceptual and fundamental issues, without relating them to elaborate political programs. Moreover, the discussion tends to be highly emotional, especially when focusing on outside intervention. By shifting the focus of the debate from Arab states and societies to external interference, the latter is often portrayed as the main problem concerning domestic reform. Also, it is obvious that most participants in the reform debate focus on individual aspects, instead of providing a comprehensive empirical analysis discussing the instruments and mechanisms of reform. One of the reasons for these shortcomings may lie in the conditions of direct and indirect censorship prevalent in Arab states, which hinder a more substantial and sophisticated discussion. Arguably, the crucial problem is that the debate is detached from the political decision-making process which usually takes place behind closed doors in Arab regimes.

Hence, the fundamental break to be faced by Arab societies today may concern the opening of society and the very establishment of a political public able to lead a debate on reform, in the first place, which is not merely academic but politically salient. This idea is taken up in an outspoken editorial by **Youssef Ibrahim**, former Middle East correspondent of the ***New York Times***, entitled "Fear Dominant in Arab Psyche." His article in ***Gulf News*** identifies a basic dread pervasive in Arab minds, surfacing both in self-censored media and everyday life in the form of "nervous jokes and absurd commentary that wastes hours describing black as white." Ibrahim views this fear as the main obstacle to any movement for social and political change:

"Our governments, our schools, our social systems, our economies, and our very sense of ethical conduct are all failed models whose shelf life is over. If Arab writers and pundits cannot say this, document it, analyse it and focus on it without fear, we cannot even begin to reform. And if we cannot reform, what is left of Arab civilisation will evaporate making place for a new agenda set by someone else. This is happening in Iraq, and it will happen to every society that blocks the oxygen to its people."

The notion that the Arab world now stands at a watershed is shared by **Hassan Munaimna** who concludes that the main challenge facing the region today is to realize that the current developments will have a lasting impact in reshaping the region, constituting a new era rather than a passing phase.

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