

Is the Arab World Immune to Democracy?

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In no country in the Arab world – from Morocco in the west to Iraq to the Arabian Peninsula in the east – nor in Iran do we find a consolidated liberal democracy. Only in Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq and the Palestinian Territories have the most important, highest-level decision-makers had to compete in serious democratic contests. In all other cases, they were either not elected at all, installed in referendums, or confirmed in sham elections.

With the exception of the weak, civil-war-threatened states or quasi-states of Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine, elections are not instruments of peaceful transfer of power in Arab countries. Rotation of political power through democratic elections is not provided for and thus does not occur. Even if official regime statements often include the word ‘democracy’, what is meant is something other than the liberal understanding of popular sovereignty, collective self-government and checks on power. A member of the Bahrain royal family expressed this clearly: ‘We have already given them democracy, but now they want participation’.¹ The American organisation Freedom House, which regularly attempts to measure and compare the elements of political and civil liberty in societies around the world, has called the Middle East the ‘least free geographic region in the world’; these countries, with the exception of Israel, are classified either as ‘not free’ or ‘partly free’.² And yet, there have been real and important political developments. Since the end of the 1980s, the level of individual freedom, especially eco-

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conomic freedom and property rights, but also freedom of information and communication, has in fact increased in most countries in the region. These countries' societies, their media, and their political institutions have become more pluralistic. Political scientists typically describe the political systems of the Arab world as 'pluralised authoritarianism',³ 'liberalised autocracy'⁴ or semi-authoritarianism.⁵ Such designations increasingly raise the question of whether these regime types represent a transition phase toward democracy, as often assumed, or whether they rather can be regarded as more or less stable forms of government.⁶ The debate over whether the political development of the Arab world is simply different, exceptional, has been going on since before the collapse of the Eastern bloc governments. These states were not included in Samuel Huntington's third wave of democratisation⁷ and the fourth-wave colour revolutions, with the exception of Lebanon's mass protest against the Syrian presence, seem to have passed by the region. Arguments and approaches based in economic or cultural determinism, or even conspiracy theory, were adduced to explain the exceptional condition of the Arab world: Western schemes for domination, oil, Islam or simply 'the Arab mind'.⁸

Instead of resorting to such essentialism, we should rather attempt to uncover forces that improve or decrease the chances for political reform or democratisation in the Arab states and Iran.

The geopolitical dimension

Liberal democracy is currently not the winning model at the global level.⁹ The old democracies of North America and Europe are losing relative power within the international system. More important than successful democratisation in Indonesia, Malaysia or Turkey, which serve as reference points for the democracy debates in the Middle East, is the enormous influence of the Chinese and Russian models. China in particular seems to show it is possible to achieve growth while combating poverty on a massive scale, all without giving in to democracy. The lesson for the political elites in other world regions, especially in the Middle East, is that one need not be democratic, but merely economically open and liberal, to achieve success. One may also be able to achieve increasing influence in the institutions of

global governance and advance one's interests at the global level. It is not the West alone that advertises its democratic model. China's practise comes across as 'non-ideology' whenever the People's Republic presents itself as a donor country that does not meddle with the internal affairs of its partners in Africa or the Middle East.¹⁰

The West's export of democracy, which in contrast to the Chinese approach represents such meddling, has been damaged, partially because it has caused damage itself, and partly because it is associated with other damage. Twenty years ago, when I was living in Syria, I was often asked by friends: Why do you export everything into our countries, just not your democracy? In the post-Iraq era I do not hear this question anymore. Instead, there is quite a bit of scepticism towards Western democratisation efforts because people in the region suspect that this ultimately means 'regime change'. And there is a fear of the dissolution of order – Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine as states or quasi-states that have held democratic elections as a result of foreign pressure or interaction are not always seen as reassuring examples.

Also important is that the Western democratisation agenda is a part of Western security policy. This may be less obvious within the EU's Barcelona Process, which does not press for rapid democratisation, but it is explicit in George W. Bush's freedom campaign which clearly formed part of the 'global war on terror'. Although this connection is not illegitimate, it does raise practical problems. First, we have to ask whether we still can adequately understand local debates, and grasp the specificities of discourses on democracy and reform that take place (and have for some time) in the Arab world or Iran once our democracy agenda is so strongly shaped by the anti-terrorism debate. Even purely academic work may be affected. Most probably, scholars who previously analysed Islamic or even Islamist discourses about governance, human rights, or international relations with a focus on the development trajectory of these states and societies would today only be taken seriously if they put such inner-Islamic debates in the context of Western security perceptions and the fight against terrorism.¹¹ Secondly, the Western amalgamation of democratisation and security interests sends a

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mixed message to observers in the Middle East. For regimes it means: 'If you do not do more for our security, we can "democratize" you'.¹² For civil society, and the few democrats, in these countries, the message is: 'We support you out of our own interests, if need be to a deathly embrace – or only until the results of prospective elections turn out differently than we expect'.

Rapid changes in the agenda and direction of American and European politics undermine credibility. This was particularly evident at the beginning of 2006, when the victory of the Islamist Hamas party in the Palestinian parliamentary elections marked the end of Western enthusiasm for rapid democratic elections in the region. It demonstrated the danger that the subjects of these regimes might vote differently than we would wish. The message for the societies in the region was unequivocal: the victor was being punished; and conditions such as accepting Israel's right to exist (one of the so-called Quartet principles) were imposed on the Hamas-led government for it to be even considered a partner and interlocutor, something which obviously was not a condition for Western states' interaction with countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran or others.

To be sure, Arab states and societies are not politically dormant. Three variables are of interest. First is the economic basis or the resource endowment of the country in question. Oil and gas exports continue to define the economy of the region. Thomas Friedman recently identified what he calls the 'first law of petro-politics'.¹³ The higher the oil revenues of a country – not only in the Arab world, but also in Russia and Venezuela – the more authoritarian the government, the less likelihood for reform. This is not a completely new discovery: a generation of social scientists have dedicated their research to the phenomenon of the rentier state, particularly in the Middle East.¹⁴ States subsidise their citizens, rather than tax them and create political expectations. The democratic slogan 'no taxation without representation' is turned on its head.

Nonetheless, in the petro-states along the Gulf, a middle class has arisen in addition to the capitalist elite, thanks in part to the allocation of resources by the state. There has been economic liberalisation, and the balance between the state and the private economy has shifted in both Saudi Arabia and the smaller states,¹⁵ so that the private sector in the Gulf states

is no longer dependent on the government. Market-economy reforms have also produced or strengthened the middle classes, which act for additional reforms. The oil-exporting nations in the Gulf are reforming their political-administrative systems. While this does not amount to the introduction of liberal democracy, it does signal a strengthened institutionalisation and predictability of behaviour as well as a limited participation by citizens. Saudi Arabia, for example, has passed legal reforms, taken steps toward establishing a Supreme Court and a Family Council to institutionalise the succession to the throne, and held local elections which, despite limited suffrage, have opened the country to the idea of participation through voting.

The second variable is the nature of the elites. The leaders who take or influence political decisions today are for the most part no longer of the generation socialised by the East–West conflict, the Arab–Israeli wars, and through Arab nationalism.¹⁶ More influential for them were their countries' experiences with globalisation and economic liberalisation, with the Mideast peace process (with all its setbacks), the conflicts in the Persian Gulf and the 'global war on terror' as well as the conflicts with and within political Islam, which largely filled a vacuum left by pan-Arabism and etatist nationalism. This background does not mechanically lead to specific decisions, but globalisation and technological change, not least the spread of the Internet, have made restrictions such as the classical newspaper censor obsolete and impractical, and encouraged modern discourses such as those surrounding human rights and civil society. With the new middle class, a civil society has grown which has filled the space between the state on the one side and the family and ethnic community on the other, without itself being necessarily democratically structured. These middle classes are interested in increased freedom and more rule of law, and they seek influence. They are, however, careful; except for a limited number of committed dissidents who – like former deputy Riad Seif in Syria or presidential candidate Ayman Nur in Egypt – end up in prison, they do not question, at least not directly, the political power structure.

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The third variable is the lively debate about better governmental leadership, human rights, rule of law and fair or just allocation of power and opportunity.¹⁷ These topics mobilise a part of the public, even if they are used not only by liberals (a weak and marginalised group) but by elements of political Islam. In the most recent Palestinian parliamentary elections, Hamas did not campaign under slogans emphasising jihad and martyrdom (this was left to the secular-nationalist Fatah) but as the List for Reform and Change. National Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in Palestine, the parties of the Iraqi Shia alliance, or the Bahraini Wifaq with their demands for respect for human dignity, rule of law, human rights and democracy, offer at least a link to liberal democratic ideas.¹⁸ It is not inconceivable for Arab liberals or left-leaning democrats to join forces with Islamists to bring about political reforms.

The West thus finds itself in a dilemma. On the one hand, Western governments must cooperate with authoritarian regimes, given their mutual economic and security-policy interests. We need Egypt and its government, given the Egyptian role in the peace process; Syria represents a similar case, as does Saudi Arabia. We need Saudi Arabia and Iran as oil producers; we need Algeria and Syria in the fight against terrorist groups. On the other hand, the lack of reform, bad governance and the perpetuation of regimes offering little opportunity for participation endanger the countries' stability, allow the growth of social tensions and provide a breeding ground for extremist or terrorist groups. Political transformation might never happen, or happen suddenly and chaotically; both results would be counter to American and European interests.¹⁹

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Though outside powers cannot successfully engage in social and political engineering in the states of the region, we can make a few rather modest policy recommendations. The first is to support those who agitate for peaceful change in their countries. This is the essential criterion for cooperation and contact, not acceptance of Western liberalism. This also means accepting that the civil society and reform actors which we like to support include not

simply those who can write project proposals in English and French or maintain a secular discourse; they also include conservative Islamic elements. It means accepting that voters, if and when at least partially free elections take place, can decide differently than we would prefer. It is certain that no enduring political reforms will take place in the Arab world without the moderate forces of political Islam that have a national agenda.²⁰ Secondly, we have to accept the complexity of political transformation. Such transformation is not linear; it is full of contradictions, detours and setbacks. It is helpful to break down the concept of democracy and democratisation into their constitutive elements: rule of law, human rights, independent judiciary, transparency, freedom of opinion and general and free elections. Even though elections are the decisive element of democracy, they are by no means the primary nor a sufficient element of sustainable political reform. It would be wrong to think that American or even Israeli history, where settler communities built states and democracies at the same time, could serve as a model for political development in the Arab world or Iran. If any model applies, it is rather the European one: democracy cannot come before a comprehensive process of state building; statehood and rule of law come first and are a precondition for political freedom and the consolidation of democracy.²¹ Thirdly, we must consider the socioeconomic basis for political reform. This means that a wide range of initiatives, from the support of small and medium-sized businesses, to cooperation with universities, technical and professional training, investment in professional and vocational schools, invitation of trainees and interns from the region – in sum, the development of new middle classes and their capacities – must be undertaken to lay the cornerstone for change. All these measures can also contribute to a true engagement of the societies of these countries, and increase the credibility of our policies.

A fourth recommendation is nearly a mantra. For the West it is crucial not to ignore the geopolitical dimension of democratisation and reform. The still-unsolved Palestine conflict remains the most important ideological source of religious and nationalist extremism. European credibility, not just the credibility of the United States, will be measured by the Arab public by the willingness and ability of our countries to work for the settlement of this conflict.

Finally, we must remember that we are not in a clash of cultures, pitting the West against the Islamic world. The gap between these cultures has grown deeper, but the real clash or cultural conflict takes place primarily within the Arab–Islamic civilisation. Throughout the Arab–Muslim world, it divides those who want to take their countries toward economic and political globalisation from the reactionary utopians, who see themselves caught in a battle with the West that transcends time and space – this includes the Crusades and 11 September as well as the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan or Palestine. This clash is first of all an ideological conflict which must be won within the Arab–Islamic world.

Western actors can at best decide whether they want to make life more difficult for their actual and potential partners in the region—those who want to integrate their countries in the globalising world—by making them the object of their policies, or whether they want to make their task easier through credible political, societal and economical engagement.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Katja Niethammer, *The King's Democracy: Institutional Transformation, Conflicts of Identities, and Discourses on Democracy in Bahrain's Reform Process*, doctoral thesis, Freie Universität Berlin, 2007, p. 161.
- 2 Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2007: Freedom Stagnation Amid Pushback Against Democracy* (Washington DC: Freedom House, 2007), www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=130&year=2007.
- 3 Volker Perthes, *Geheime Gärten. Die neue arabische Welt* (Berlin: Siedler, 2002).
- 4 Daniel Brumberg, 'Democratization in the Arab World? The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 4, October 2002, pp. 56–68.
- 5 Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-authoritarianism* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).
- 6 See for example Thomas Carothers, 'The End of the Transition Paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 1, January 2002, pp. 5–21; Oliver Schlumberger, *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

- 7 Samuel B. Huntington, 'Democracy's Third Wave', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 2, no. 2, Spring 1991 pp. 12–34.
- 8 Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1973).
- 9 According to Freedom House, 47% of states worldwide are currently liberal democracies. India's membership in this group guarantees that this is more than one-third of the global population (46%). If we ask for *stable* liberal democracies, the number would obviously be smaller.
- 10 Denis M. Tull, *Die Afrikapolitik der Volksrepublik China*, SWP-Studie 2005/S 20 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2005).
- 11 See for example Gudrun Krämer, *Gottes Staat als Republik. Reflexionen zeitgenössischer Muslime zu Islam, Menschenrechten und Demokratie* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1999); and Abdullahi Ahmad An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990).
- 12 This warning was forcefully expressed in Bush's State of the Union speech in February 2005 and by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the American University of Cairo on 20 June 2005. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html> and <http://www.arabist.net/archives/2005/06/20/condoleezza-rices-remarks-and-excerpts-from-her-cairo-speech/>.
- 13 Thomas Friedman, 'The First Law of Petropolitics', *Foreign Policy*, no. 154, May–June 2006, pp. 28–36.
- 14 See particularly the classical work of Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani (eds), *The Rentier State: Nation, State and Integration in the Arab World* (London: Croom Helm, 1987).
- 15 See Giacomo Luciani, 'Public and Private Sector in the Middle East: Implications for Politics and Research', in Volker Perthes, *Looking Ahead: Challenges for Middle East Politics and Research*, EuroMeSCo Paper no. 29 (Lisbon: EuroMeSCo, 2004).
- 16 See Volker Perthes (ed.), *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004).
- 17 These debates can be found in English in the *Arab Reform Bulletin* of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org>.
- 18 See Muriel Asseburg, *Moderate Islamists as Reform Actors: Conditions and Programmatic Change*, SWP research paper (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2005), p 5.
- 19 Nathan Brown, Amr Hamzawy and Marina Ottaway, *Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper No. 67, 2006.
- 20 See Asseburg, *Moderate Islamists as Reform Actors*.
- 21 Daniel Brumberg, 'Democracy and Security in the Middle East', *Democracy and Society*, vol. 4, no. 2, Spring 2007, pp. 12–14.

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