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THE NEW STORM AND DEMOCRACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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INTRODUCTION

Ten years after the Desert Storm operation against Iraq blew devastatingly through the Middle East, the war against Afghanistan is bringing to the region a new storm – one that has challenged Arabs and Muslims to take a clear stand for or against terrorism. In the ensuing debate, Arabs and Muslims have also been challenged to respond to criticisms and charges that their culture was incompatible with democracy and freedom. The general response of the Arab countries has been to condemn terrorism and reaffirm their support for freedom and democracy. This is not enough. I shall argue that while progress has been made in democratisation, the real challenge, and the only truly lasting response to the campaign of vilification of Arabic and Islamic culture, is to consolidate the institutions of democracy. Failure to do that perpetuates the lopsided relationship between the West and the Middle East.

The West behaves exploitatively and self-interestedly, which has often meant placing self-interests above the values of democracy. In turn, the absence of truly accountable governments compounds the frustrations and the anger of the ordinary citizens against the West. Where the instances of injustice the West perpetrated are glaring, for example, the dispossession and the denial of rights to the Palestinian people, it is easy to see why anger can turn to disillusionment and despair. The longer this elementary and basic fact is ignored the closer conflict areas, in the Middle East and elsewhere, come to the boiling point.

Yet, the debate that followed the events of 11 September, largely determined by the mainstream press and television media in the West, largely ignored context and causal relationships, focusing instead on the drama inherent in the war against Afghanistan. Moreover, despite Western leaders' protestations that this war is not a war against Islam, an intellectual war has been waged to portray Islam and the Arab culture as fundamentally opposed to democracy and freedom.

These two points – the discussion of historical context and whether Islam and the Arab culture are not somehow involved in this confrontation – deserve attention. The point about context can be disposed of quite expeditiously because it is self-evident and therefore requires little

elaboration. The question of democracy and its compatibility with Islam and the Arab culture deserves a longer discussion.

THE CONTEXT

Former US President Bill Clinton recognised the relevance of the question of context and, in this case, the causal relationship between gross inequalities around the world, lack of socio-economic opportunities, frustrations and despair, on the one hand, and violence, on the other. He told a human rights conference in the Czech capital, Prague, on 15 October 2001, that “the US and its allies had to beat terrorism, but in the long run the West also had to bring an end to global inequalities.”¹

The issue of context raises the question of whether American foreign policy orientations, especially in the Middle East, have had anything to do with the hatred and the frustrations that many Muslims and Arabs have come to feel against the United States. It should be clear that answering this question in the affirmative does not in anyway absolve the perpetrators of horrible attacks against innocent people of their responsibility, nor does it give any justification to their pathologically criminal act. The question, however, is valid because while most Arabs and Muslims have condemned the 11 September attacks against the USA and feel genuine sympathy for the American people, they feel only frustrations and anger at American foreign policy in the Middle East. These feelings define the context in which acts of violence are committed in the name of Islam.

The modern historical context that gave rise to the conflict in Palestine is easily documented. The American King-Crane commission, which went to the Middle East in 1919 to ascertain the population’s wishes for the future form of their government after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, provided authoritative and conclusive evidence on the question of context.

While the final report of the King-Crane Commission was being drafted, Mr. Charles Crane cabled US President Woodrow Wilson on 30 August 1919, giving him a summary of the Commission’s conclusion: “We are recommending for Syria first that whatever administration go in be a true mandatory under League of Nations; second that Syria including Palestine and Lebanon be kept a unity according to the desires of the great majority; third that Syria be under a single mandate; fourth that Emir Feisal be King of the new Syria State; fifth that the extreme Zionist program be seriously modified; sixth that America be asked to take the single mandate for Syria...”² Note the trust that people in the Arab world placed in America, which at that time had no history of involvement in the Middle East.

The Commissioners went on to recommend “serious modification of the extreme Zionist program for Palestine of unlimited immigration of Jews, looking finally to making Palestine

distinctly a Jewish state. The Commissioners began their study of Zionism with minds predisposed in its favour, but the actual facts in Palestine, coupled with the force of the general principles proclaimed by the Allies and accepted by the Syrians have driven them to the recommendation here made...The fact repeatedly came out in the Commission's conferences with Jewish representatives, that the Zionists looked forward to a practically complete dispossession of the present non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine." Repeating President Wilson's 4 July 1917 commitment to the principle of self-determination, the commissioners wrote: "If that principle is to rule, and so the wishes of the Palestine's population are to be decisive as to what is to be done with Palestine, then it is to be remembered that the non-Jewish population of Palestine – nearly nine-tenths of the whole – are emphatically against the Zionist programme... No British officer consulted by the Commissioners, believed that the Zionist programme could be carried out except by force... That of itself is evidence of the strong sense of the injustice of the Zionist program."³ The United States withdrew into isolation, and the recommendations of the King-Crane Commission were ignored. France and England went about implementing their secret Sykes-Picot Agreement for dividing the Middle East according to their imperial designs, which included the dismemberment of Syria and, for England, the realisation of the Zionist project in Palestine.

Over eighty years later, with Israel established on 78 per cent of mandated Palestine and the original majority Palestinian Arabs still unable to establish their own independent state in the remaining 22 per cent of their country, the strong sense of injustice the American commissioners warned against in their report came to be deeply implanted in the collective psyche of the Arabs. And there is no escaping the responsibility of the West in the origins and continuation of the conflict.

Writing before the 11 September events, James Meek articulated this inescapable fact, clearly understood in America and in the West but persistently ignored: "The United States, and by extension Western Europe," he wrote, "became a target for hostility and terrorism from elements in the Islamic world first and foremost because the United States supported Israel in its war to exist, and in all its wars – not because of some inherent hatred of the West on the part of Muslims. Obvious? Perhaps. But it needs to be restated. The West's misunderstanding of the nature and strength of Islamic movements in past decades, while the Arab-Israeli conflict influenced all analysis, has been bad enough, without it continuing after the conflict ends."⁴

The relevance of the Palestinian conflict and its centrality in the search for genuine peace in the Middle East of today was recognised by the Turkish Prime Minister, Bülent Ecevit, when he told CNN on 11 October 2001 that the most urgent task after the successful prosecution of the war was the settlement of the Palestinian conflict. The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, receiving Yasser Arafat the following week in London, reached the same conclusion and affirmed his support for the establishment of a Palestinian state. The US President, George Bush, also made similar statements about the need to recognise the right of the Palestinian people to establish their own state.

Of course, the American and British leaders may be motivated less by the intellectual awareness that nothing happens in a vacuum and that understanding the context is a prerequisite for addressing the causes of violence, and more by the need to maintain the support they received from their Arab allies for the successful prosecution of the war against Afghanistan. Their interest in bringing a just and lasting settlement to the Palestine conflict may be relegated to the back burner when the support of Arab regimes is no longer as urgently needed. Commentators in the Arabic press have been quick to point out that the Arabs had had similar assurances before the Gulf War, but that after the successful prosecution of that war with the active support of several Arab countries, all the Arab countries got was a the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991. The conference agreements were not implemented, they feel, because the United States failed to put any pressure on Israel.⁵

Whatever the sincerity of Western statements of support for Palestinian rights, the frustrations and anger of the Arabs are real. And while most Arabs and Muslims do not take Osama bin Laden seriously or harbour any illusions about his interpretation of Islam, they could not disagree with his astute statement of facts through al-Jazeera pan-Arab satellite channel on 8 October. He told the viewers, addressing Muslim and Arab audiences world-wide: "Israeli tanks are wreaking havoc in Palestine – in Jenin, Ramallah, Rafah and Beit Jala and other parts of the land of Islam – but no one raises his voice or bats an eyelid."

In Lebanon, al-Diyar newspaper sympathetically commented: "It is a shame that bin Laden had to go to a remote cave in Afghanistan ... that he could not find a foothold anywhere in the Arab world to proclaim that a crime has been committed by the West by giving Jews a homeland in Palestine at the expense of the Palestinian people."⁶

Nor were Arab official views much different from those of public opinion makers and most ordinary Arabs. Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdullah Khatib expressed the common official view in Arab circles: "We need a more active involvement by the US in the peacemaking efforts. To succeed in combating terrorism we have to address the root cause . . . We all know the main source of grievance is the despair that prevails with failure to satisfy the national rights of Palestinians."⁷

Intellectuals and critics of Arab regimes readily reached the same conclusion placing it in the same historic context, though more poignantly. Mohamed Heikal, the former confidant of President Nasser of Egypt and the foremost political commentator in the Arab world, told a London reporter: "There is an unbelievable degree of anti-American feeling all over the area... The reasons for that loathing of the US are", he says, "easy to pinpoint - the Americans' 'blind' support for Israel and their backing for illegitimate, discredited regimes across the Middle East."⁸

In Israel itself, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon tried to destroy any causal relationship between the violent acts of Hamas and other Palestinian groups and the violence of Israeli occupation and dispossession. He and the Israeli right-wing generally would have us believe that Israel's war against the Palestinians is no different from America's war against Afghanistan.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the BBC on 1 November 2001 that the principal reason for Palestinian and Arab hostility to Israel was that Israel was an extension of America, representing democracy and freedom. No other context was necessary in his view. And the British interviewer failed to challenge him.⁹ The destruction of Palestinian society, the expulsion, the dispossession and the continued occupation apparently should not have upset the Palestinians whose hatred of the USA and the West, the former Prime Minister of Israel seemed to be suggesting, emanates from their culture which is opposed to freedom and democracy.

Following the October 2001 assassination of an Israeli cabinet minister known for his overtly racist outbursts against the Palestinian people, Sharon sent his tanks and troops to occupy six Palestinian towns. In the process, the Israeli army killed 40 Palestinians. A former director of Mossad, Danny Yatom, lucidly recognised the inescapable logic of context and causal relationship. He commented to the Jerusalem Post "The incursion caused great hardship to the general Palestinian population. It increases their hatred, which means that many more Palestinians join Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the P.F.L.P., which means that many more suicide bombers, which means that many more [Israeli] retaliations, and so on."¹⁰

In March 2002, the Sharon government, having secured clear support from the Bush administration, launched what the UN Secretary-General called "an all out-war" against the Palestinians. In the process, using gunships, helicopters and missiles, they invaded refugee camps, most notably the Jenin refugee camp, major Palestinian cities, and destroyed and confined to what is left of his headquarters, President Yassir Arafat. The anger and outrage in the Arab world was unprecedented, prompting leading Egyptian journalist Mohammad Hessanein Heikal to say that Arab nationalism is still alive. Arab leaders, who offered a peace plan to Israel, only to see it rejected out of hand, felt both humiliated and impotent. Pro-American Arab regimes felt betrayed by their American ally and at the same time threatened in their power by increasingly angry and frustrated populations.

King Abdullah of Jordan repeatedly warned against an impending catastrophe in the region. When President Bush finally yield to Arab pressure and agreed to send Secretary of State Colin Powell to reinforce the President's own message for an 'immediate' Israeli withdrawal from the recently occupied Palestinian territories, Secretary Powell seemed in no rush to go to Israel and took his time going to Morocco, Egypt and Madrid first. In Morocco, Powell seemed stunned when King Hassan V pointedly asked him: "Don't you think you should have gone directly to Jerusalem?" In the end, Powell's mission failed to secure any Israeli withdrawal and he returned humiliated, just as his President had been before, him, having

repeatedly issued orders for 'immediate withdrawal' only to be rebuffed by a Sharon intent on pursuing the war against a defenceless Palestinian population.

The editor-in-chief of the semi-official newspaper al-Ahram, described the anger and the frustrations of President Hosni Mubarak (May 2) and his feeling of betrayal. The Egyptian leader, like other Arab leaders, who lent their support to the so-called 'war against terror' in Afghanistan on the understanding that the USA would then address the Palestinian question in a just and comprehensive way. But when the Arab support no longer seemed necessary, the Bush administration seems to have turned the 'war on terror' against the Arabs and Muslims. Bush described Iraq and Iran as "evil" and justified President Arafat's virtual imprisonment for his alleged failure to do more against 'terror'. He severely criticised Syria and Lebanon for allegedly supporting organisations accused of terrorist activity; Washington ordered Yemen to clamp down on al-Qaeda members. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan are asked to condemn all forms of terrorism, even if it was resistance against occupation. The war against terror, said Mubarak, has now turned against the Middle East. Opposition papers in Egypt called for a 'Great Arab Intifada' for change and reforms in the Arab world. (al-Sha'ab, 26 April 2002). Francois Passely called on the Arabs to walk with their heads down for the Imperialist era is back. (al-Sha'ab, 26 April).

The Palestine question is not the only context in the Middle East today. The continued sanctions against Iraq, chiefly supported by the United States and Britain, are inescapably part of the international relational context of the Middle East. The Iraqis and the Arabs are not the only people to point in dismay to the human tragedies brought about by the sanctions against the Iraqi people ten years after the end of the Gulf War. Denis Halliday, a UN official for 34 years who headed the oil for food programme for Iraq in Baghdad, resigned in September 1999 to protest against the impact of the sanctions. He confessed that he felt uncomfortable flying the UN flag in Iraq while UN-imposed sanctions were wreaking havoc on innocent civilians. He pointed out that there were "4000 to 5000 children dying unnecessarily every month due to the impact of sanctions because of the breakdown of water and sanitation, inadequate diet and the bad internal health situation."¹¹

A former Attorney-General of the United States of America, Ramsey Clark, stated in a 26 January 2000 letter calling for an end to the sanctions addressed to the members of the UN Security Council: "[The number of deaths caused by the sanctions] must shock the conscience of every sentient human being."

It is important to remember the context, so to speak, in which the sanctions were imposed over ten years ago, as the United Nations itself reported. A UN investigative team headed by Partti Ahtisaari went to Iraq in March 1991 to report on the post-war situation. The team reported to the UN that: "The recent conflict has wrought near-apocalyptic results upon the economic infrastructure of what had been, until January 1991, a rather highly urbanised and mechanised society. Now, most means of modern life support have been destroyed or rendered tenuous. Iraq has, for some time to come, been relegated to a pre-industrial age, but

with all the disabilities of post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology.”

After the resignation of Denis Halliday as humanitarian co-ordinator in Iraq, his successor, Hans von Sponeck, also resigned on 13 February 2000, asking, “How long should the civilian population of Iraq be exposed to such punishment for something they have never done?” Two days later, Jutta Burghardt, head of the World Food Programme in Iraq, also resigned, saying privately that what was being done to the people of Iraq was intolerable.

When asked who, in his view, was primarily responsible for the deaths of those 500,000 children under five estimated to have died as a result of the sanctions in the past 9 years, Mr. Halliday said:

“All the members of the Permanent Security Council, when they passed 1284, reconfirmed that economic sanctions had to be sustained, knowing the consequences. That constitutes ‘intent to kill’, because we know that sanctions are killing several thousand per month... That’s why I’ve been using the word ‘genocide’, because this is a deliberate policy to destroy the people of Iraq. I’m afraid I have no other view at this late stage.”¹²

For those living in the Middle East and feeling what the Palestinians or Iraqis, or Libyans or Sudanese, who also suffered from American bombardments and sanctions, felt, it does not take a particularly hateful mind to feel anger and frustration against the West. It does not take a particularly violent culture to allow the emergence of a context that breeds instability, despair and concomitant violence.

DEMOCRACY, ISLAM AND THE MARCH OF DEMOCRATISATION

IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE ARAB WORLD

One of the most important lessons to emerge from the events of 11 September and their aftermath is the slowly emerging realisation that Arab regimes need to mount an effective response to the myriad challenges bringing into question Arab culture and Islam and their compatibility with freedom and democracy, and ultimately the place of the Arabs in international society. Arab League Secretary-General, Amre Moussa, told an Egyptian newspaper on 20 October that Arab foreign ministers, at an emergency Arab League meeting in the United Arab Emirates, identified three agenda priorities: a response to and condemnation of terrorism, the urgency of settling the Palestinian question in conformity with internationally accepted principles of justice and law, and the need for a co-ordinated and effective Arab response to the challenges directed at Arab culture and the Muslim faith.¹³

A few brief illustrations of the other war against the Arabs and Islam and the challenges under the third priority that Amre Moussa mentioned shall suffice. First, as American war planes were pounding Afghanistan, no less a figure than Silvio Berlusconi, the Prime Minister of Italy, was informing his compatriots and the world that this war was about freedom because Christianity valued freedom and democracy while Islam did not. Then there was the widely read column of a New York Times writer in the second week of October in which he asserts that Arab regimes were afraid to wholeheartedly support America's so-called war on terror because they were afraid of freedom and democracy.¹⁴ On 23 October 2001 the editor of Newsweek International informed us during a public debate organised by the BBC World News that Islam had produced a culture of frustration and despair and that "there is less freedom today in every single Arab state than there was thirty years ago."¹⁵

Under other circumstances, these statements would normally be the stock in trade of perpetual cold warriors spewing hatred against the Arabs and Islam, but coming from the mainstream establishment media and political figures, however ill-informed and biased they may be, they suggest the enormity of the challenge the Arab regimes and Muslim countries face in trying to co-ordinate an effective and sustainable response.

In the panoply of possible responses, the most effective would be a proactive and sustained support for the march of democratisation that has already started. This requires a discussion of democracy and democratisation in the Middle East and the Arab world, to which I now turn.

TRIUMPH AND CHALLENGES OF THE DEMOCRATIC IDEA

The early practices of democracy may be traced back not only to the ancient Athenians but also to the Phoenicians and the Egyptians. The European thinkers of the Enlightenment were not the only, or indeed the first, source of the values that came to be associated with democratic governance. Long before Rousseau and Locke, Arab social philosopher Alfarabi spoke of liberty and equality and of rule based on the consent of the governed.

Revolutionary France exported its democratic ideas and, for a brief period, Napoleon was successful in firing up nationalist passions throughout Europe with the principle of self-determination and republican ideals. Napoleon's defeat in 1815 put an end to this revolutionary phase of the march of democracy and allowed the monarchies to re-establish the ascendancy of the old order; l'ancien régime was restored.

The Concert of Europe, a coalition of the conservative European monarchies, worked, throughout the nineteenth century, to maintain a certain balance of power designed to thwart the corrupting influence of democratic ideas. World War I and its upheavals, however, proved fatal to l'ancien regime and helped revive and spread democracy, at least temporarily. By the end of the war, the Russian Empire, the Austria-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire had all collapsed. American President Woodrow Wilson put his personal prestige and that of his country behind democratic principles that he said should inform the new public order to emerge from the rubble of the war. Before the war there had been only three republics. By the end of 1918 there were thirteen.

Democracy's triumph, however, was brief. The Russian Revolution rejected Western democratic values in favour of people's democracy based on ownership of the means of production. The bourgeois elite in much of Europe, fearing the loss of their privileges and property, became more interested in fighting communism than in supporting democracy. A military regime came to Hungary in 1919, a fascist government to Italy in 1922, Primo de Rivera seized power in Spain and Antonio de Oliveira Salazar began a dictatorship in Portugal; Poland moved to the extreme right in 1926, and Nazism triumphed when Hitler came to power in 1933 in Germany. The forces of democracy were in retreat in much of Europe.

CONTEMPORARY SPECULATIONS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

After World War II, the Soviet Union emerged as a superpower and expanded its influence to East and Central Europe while various communist leaders debated the feasibility of exporting the revolution to emerging new nations. The United States responded with a policy designed to contain the expansion of communist influence and ideas. American policymakers feared that, if unchecked, the communist role model of political and economic development would spread to the newly independent states and shut out democracy as a role model for the political and economic institutions of the emerging new nations.

World War II discredited the totalitarian challenges to democracy and their cruel repressive tactics against dissenters. To guard against the recurrence of the same social and economic conditions that led to the rise of Fascism, Western communist leaders wooed popular support by calling for progressive democracy. Influenced by Catholic humanism, Christian democratic leaders such as the Italian Prime Minister Alcide de Gasperi and German leader Konrad Adenauer, shared political aspirations with the Communists and Socialists, their war-time allies in the Resistance movement that fought Fascism. After the war, they combined humanism and social concern with commitment to democracy in a broad-based political formation known as Christian Democracy.

European Socialists emerged from the War as the strongest political formation. Socialists had governed Sweden since 1932, the British Labour came to power after the War and proceeded to nationalise key industries and introduce major provisions for the welfare state. In the US, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations advocated policies of social equity. Still Johnson's war on poverty did not prevent growing involvement in the Vietnam War.

CRITICS OF WESTERN NOTIONS OF DEMOCRACY FROM THE SOUTH

In the liberal tradition, politics is interpreted above all as a conflict and compromise between different interests. It is not so much about people participating with all their different beliefs and values as it is about their interests being the basis of politics. Democracy is thus identified with fair competition among different interests. Critics from the South argue that the notion of democracy as the open competition of private interests originated in the hegemonic Western culture, from historical and social processes gravitating around capitalism. Democracy's rationality became capitalist rationality, and as thus, its most important strategy was to come to terms with social problems created by capitalism – without challenging it. They point out that ontologically speaking, the essence of democracy in Athens was not defined by differing and competing interests, but by public discussions that encouraged participation and a questioning attitude, as a basis for emancipation and a more just society.¹⁶

The applicability of the model of differing and competing interests in the developing countries presents some challenges. For instance, states in the West perform the function of settling competing interests, whereas states in the developing countries have not always been able to do so because significant parts of the population are marginalised, and an informal sector controls a growing part of the economy. Instead of organising themselves into political parties to advance and defend their interests, important segments of the population turn their back on state power. They are disillusioned and distrust their governments because of a history of corruption, chronic economic failures and the absence of venues of participation.¹⁷

Critics also urge Western observers to examine the limitations and problems of democracy in their own societies, before hastening to question the credentials of fledgling democracies in the South. They point out that the South may not be eager to accept Western definitions of democracy and that distinctive southern historical and cultural contexts may give rise to innovative forms of democratic representation, accountability and popular participation.¹⁸

ROBERT DAHL AND JUSTIFICATION FOR DEMOCRACY

Among contemporary social scientists who have given thought to democracy, Robert Dahl has developed arguably the most enduring analysis. Dahl based his justification for democracy on utilitarian grounds that are reminiscent of those Jeremy Bentham and John

Stuart Mill. He argued that democracy, more than any alternative, provides an orderly process by which a majority of citizens can induce their government to do what they most want it to do.

He reformulates Mill's emphasis on liberty and self-reliance to provide justification for the superiority of the democratic process in advancing human development. The democratic process is superior, Dahl points out, in three different ways: first, it promotes individual and collective freedom better than any alternative regime. Second, it promotes human development through encouraging moral autonomy and personal responsibility for one's choices. Third, the democratic process, though not perfect, is the best way by which people can protect and advance their common interests and goods. Dahl also addresses the major questions that Alexis de Tocqueville, Mill and others raised, namely the concern about the tyranny of the majority, and the tension between liberty and equality.¹⁹

THE TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY

De Tocqueville had warned about some of the dangerous consequences of the democratic idea, none more strongly than about that of the tyranny of the majority. De Tocqueville was particularly concerned about the majority's coercive ability to stifle dissent.

Mill dreaded the consequences of cultural and social conformity of the tyranny of the majority. Lord Bryce, the late-nineteenth-early-twentieth century British politician, feared that power of the majority in America would lead to a passive and submissive population. The belief in the right of the majority, said Bryce, produced a belief that the majority must be right. "A citizen languidly interested in the question at issue finds it easier to comply with and adopt the view of the majority than to hold out against it."²⁰

Dahl, an American democrat himself, held the view that, on the contrary, the weight of public opinion in America, far from culturally and intellectually subjugating the minority, provided consensus and stability. Just as the weight of traditional deference to social hierarchy and institutions' adaptive capacities provided stability in England.

The crucial factor, Dahl argued, was the fundamental agreement of the American people about the ground rules of the game. The American Constitution seeks to resolve political conflict within society, so long as there is fundamental agreement on the broad outlines of republican ideals. The weight of public opinion, that which produces 'the fatalism of the multitude' is, continues Dahl, the necessary affirmation of broad support for the institutions and for their underlying values of governance. And this is what produces consensus and

stability. In America, Dahl concludes, there is faith in the people and in their ability to live in a free and equal society, and govern themselves without the need to rely on monarchs and aristocrats to do it for them.

LIBERTY AND EQUALITY

But if the idea and the practice of democracy promote the values of democracy – freedom, human development, and protection and advancement of shared human interests – they also presuppose certain kinds of equality. Dahl distinguishes three kinds of equality: the intrinsic moral equality of all persons, the equality of personal autonomy of all adults to determine what is best for them, and the political equality of all citizens.

But given Dahl's justification for democracy and the kind of equality it presupposes, is it not possible then to draw a moral conclusion about the necessity for equality of opportunities to attain these goods? Dahl argues that such a moral conclusion would transform democracy into a system prized not for its own end-values but for its role as a means for distributive justice. Unavoidably, Dahl, like de Tocqueville before him, finds himself confronted with the issue of how to reconcile liberty with equality.

Dahl believes that the conflict between equality and liberty can be resolved if we accept a certain view of liberty within the context of democracy. Thus, liberty does not necessarily have to mean selfishness, and if we adopt an optimistic view of human rationality and human potentialities, he points out, it is possible to accept the notion that individual liberty is related to one's commitment to society.

But, like Mill before him, he concedes that such a view of liberty and democracy is contingent upon active participation in the political process. Individual liberties within the social constraints of communal living, he argues, are enhanced by individual participation in common social and political pursuits in a society based on equality. But what kind of equality does such a view of liberty presuppose?

DEMOCRACY AND INEQUALITY

Dahl of course had in mind political equality. He anticipates objections to his argument and formulates them as questions: wealth, income and property are political resources; their unequal distribution in a democratic society means that political power is unequally distributed. Does this not threaten democracy and its supposed premise of political equality? Another variant of the argument goes like this: if democracy promotes the political equality of

its citizens, should it not promote some measure of economic equality and, therefore, promote an alternative to the market-based economy?

Dahl answers this by suggesting that the task of democracy is not to achieve equality (which is possibly unachievable) but to reduce inequalities. This brings us back full circle to de Tocqueville. Dahl is in effect speaking, not about real political equality, and even less of course about economic equality, but rather about equality of position or equality before the law. To this, the nineteenth century English social philosopher, Thomas Carlyle, could have repeated his harsh criticism of democracy: "Liberty, I am told, is a divine thing. Liberty when it becomes 'Liberty to die by starvation' is not so divine."²¹

But Dahl is a realist and he has no illusion about what democracy can and cannot do. And so, his premise that democracy should not be about achieving equality but rather about reducing inequality has stood the test of time. The political causes of these inequalities, he suggests, may be reduced to three categories: differences in resources and opportunities for employing violent coercion; in economic positions, resources and opportunities; and in knowledge, information and cognitive skills. Advanced democracies, he concludes, would therefore be actively seeking to reduce the great inequalities in the capacities and opportunities for their citizens to participate fully in the political process by acting to reduce inequalities in the distribution of economic resources, opportunities, knowledge, information and cognitive skills.²²

DEFINING DEMOCRACY

It is important therefore that while taking into account the specific cultural and historical developments in a given country, the process of democratisation be viewed in a larger context, again let us remain mindful of the context. Instead of a democracy driven by the capitalist rationality of economic growth, which does not necessarily translate into sustainable human development, democracy must be conceived as a programme of action and a moral project designed to broaden popular participation in decision-making for the purpose of enhancing and sustaining human development.

Hence the importance of a non-ethnocentric definition of democracy and of a broadly based approach to democratisation that takes into account the prevailing local cultural and historical contexts.

Dahl suggested that the term 'polyarchy', 'rule by many', reflects better the practices that we commonly associate with democratic rule as we know it today. Polyarchy is a political system

that encompasses the following institutions: (a) elected officials, (b) free and fair elections, (c) inclusive suffrage, (d) right to run for office, (e) freedom of expression, (f) alternative information, and (g) autonomous associations. These institutions of polyarchy are necessary but not sufficient for the attainment of the democratic process.²³

In his classic work *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Joseph Schumpeter defined democracy as “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote”.²⁴

Other scholars applied and extended the definition of ‘polyarchy’. They defined democracy as: “a system of government that meets three essential conditions: meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and groups (especially political parties) for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force; a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair elections, such that no major (adult) social group is excluded; and a level of civil and political liberties – freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organisations – sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation.”²⁵

There is a general consensus today in the international community that building sustainable democracies requires a commitment to a relationship between state and society that is based on (a) participation in a plural political process, (b) the rule of law and respect for civil liberties, (c) fair and regular competition for political power, (d) the development of a vibrant civil society, and (e) the transparency of political and economic transactions, and the accountability of public officials.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 identified three groups of rights accepted by the international community as basic rights. These were enumerated in articles 19 to 21, which we suggest should be considered as the essential underpinnings of our approach to democratic theory and the democratisation process:

Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20

(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

(2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21

(1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

(2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.

(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections, which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.²⁶

The effective functioning of a democracy requires certain structures that vary from one country to another. Still, certain basic principles are indispensable. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 1995 Development Assistance Committee report issued specifically identified as indispensable principles the concept of consent, legitimacy and accountability to the people, the presence of a participatory process and the possibility of the peaceful replacement of one government with another. We take these to be indispensable foundations to our discussion of democracy and our assessment of the democratisation process and its socio-cultural and historical contexts in the Middle East and the Arab world and, indeed, throughout the rest of the world.

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The cultural and historical context of governance in the Middle East and the Arab world has been marked by the legacy of imperial involvement in the region, the emergence of Arab nationalism, the establishment of the state of Israel in Palestine and the subsequent Arab-Israeli conflict, the geo-strategic importance of the region and its oil resources, and the Cold War calculations of the superpowers. Recently, the emergence of political Islam as a

competing alternative to secular Arab nationalism has presented challenges and opportunities for governments to broaden the basis of their popular support and promote initiatives of democratisation.

The democratic principles of contract between ruler and ruled, popular participation in governance and tolerance of differences of opinions find their roots in traditional Islamic thought. But the revolutionary principles of self-determination and republican ideals of Western models of governance were first brought to the Middle East with Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt in 1798.

While the French were bringing to Egypt their republican ideas and imperial interests, the English were establishing a foothold in Muscat in 1798, occupying Aden in 1839 and bringing their own capitalist trade and imperial interests to the region. They proceeded to sign Protection Treaties and agreements with Bahrain (1861), Kuwait (1899) and more than 200 agreements with other sultanates and sheikhdoms that they had created on the Aden and Hadramaut coast. This led to the suppression and elimination of traditional Arab trading activities and the incorporation of the region in the imperial trading system.

"These developments," wrote one analyst, "had four unfortunate results, which still plague the region to this day: absolutist rule replaced tribal democracy; conflicts over frontiers which had no historical basis became both rife and insoluble; conditions of citizenship in this or that state or statelet became arbitrary; and instead of the general sentiment of belonging to one people, even though divided into various tribes, artificial local patriotism was created and fostered. All four consequences assumed enormous importance when huge deposits of oil were discovered."²⁷

In the Middle East, the influence of the French revolutionary ideas of self-determination and individual freedoms, and the policies of Muhammad Ali whose modernisation, industrialisation and educational reforms encouraged the flow of Western ideas to Egypt, helped form a set of Arab nationalist ideas. The influence of these ideas grew throughout the nineteenth century, and led to the emergence of an Arab nationalist movement seeking to put an end to Ottoman rule in the area. Hopes for freedom and democratic governance were strengthened when the British promised their Arab allies in World War I to support such aspirations after the war, in return for Arab support in defeating and expelling the Ottoman empire from the Middle East.

US President Woodrow Wilson's public support for the emergence of a new public order based on the concept of self-determination and government on the basis of the consent of the governed further provided encouragement and determination to the Arab people in their quest for self-determination. When it became apparent that the victorious

imperial powers, especially Britain and France, intended to divide the Middle East into zones of influence and domination and were not ready to apply the principles of self-determination, the Arab people rose in revolt.

The Egyptian Revolution in 1919, the Syrian National Conference that declared independence in March 1920, and the Iraqi revolution in June 1920, all demanded independence, the right to self-determination, and the establishment of representative government based on the consent of the governed.

The ability of the imperial powers to suppress these revolts helped radicalise the next wave of revolts. These took place in Palestine against the British administration and the growing infrastructures of the Zionist project of establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The suppression of the Palestinian uprising in 1936-39 foreshadowed the frustration of Palestinian aspirations for independence at the end of the British mandate in 1948, and the establishment of the state of Israel. The subsequent Arab-Israeli conflict dominated the politics of the region, and created an environment of violence, hostility and polarisation.

Many Arab nationalists saw the failure of the post-World War I Arab parliamentary systems to resist imperial domination in the region as a failure of the model of co-operation with the West. The readiness of liberal Arab regimes to co-operate with the imperial powers and accommodate their interests in the region did not produce greater willingness on the part of the imperial powers to accede to popular Arab aspirations of independence and self-rule. To many Arab nationalists, this was not only a betrayal of Western promises made during the war, but a failure of the democratic idea itself, which was being successfully challenged in Europe, especially from the right.

This inevitably led to the emergence of radical opposition both from the left and from the right. Following World War II, The confrontation of these forces of opposition with the established regimes erupted into political and social upheavals, culminating in polarisation and the radicalisation of political and social conflicts.

The cultural and historical context was ripe for the emergence of radical regimes, determined to oppose not only the imperial powers, but also their liberal democratic institutions. The political programmes of these new regimes declared a commitment to achieve economic and social justice at home, and to reverse the consequences of the 1948 defeat in the Palestine. The politics and superpower rivalries of the Cold War further polarised the domestic and regional policies of the Arab countries, creating an atmosphere of distrust and disillusionment, and undermining political and economic reforms.

In a short span of time, a majority of the Arab people was living in countries where military officers had come to power: Syria in 1949 and again in 1961, Egypt in 1952, Iraq in 1958, Sudan in 1958, Yemen in 1962, Algeria in 1965 and Libya in 1969.²⁸

The military defeats of the Arab armies in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war led to the Israeli occupation of more Arab territories (the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights). But it also exposed the inadequacy of the radical, secular Arab nationalist forces, supported by economic and military aid from the socialist camp led by the Soviet Union. Following the 1973 war, Egypt led the shift away from secular Arab nationalism and socialist economic development models, and towards a negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and liberalised economic and political reforms.

IS ISLAM AN OBSTACLE TO DEMOCRATISATION?

The debate about democratisation in the Arab and Muslim world is characterised by its negative attributes. It is generally absent from the growing interest in and attention to the democratisation process around the world. Occasionally, it is cast in terms that purport to explain the apparent slow pace of democratisation in the Arab world by reference to constraints inherent in the Arab and Muslim cultures. In the study by Diamond et al, on democracy in 26 countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia, the states of the Middle East were omitted, because, the authors suggest, of lack of previous democratic experience.²⁹

Yet, as we have seen above, the transition to democracy in the West, as we know it today, was not the result of previous democratic experience, but rather of a gradual process of evolution, aided by struggles and revolts against absolute power, slavery and inequality. It took a war to abolish slavery in the United States and a long struggle to enfranchise women in the Western world. Even in France, democracy experienced setbacks and reversals of fortunes, and was seriously challenged in much of Europe in the inter-war period. Democratic changes, under the best of circumstances, came by gradually.

In addition, the Middle East, especially Egypt, did in fact have a liberal democratic experience. The inter-war period was in fact marked by liberal experiments modelled on the Western norms of governments limited by constitutional principles, representative parliaments and in which changes of government occurred peacefully. The failure of these institutions was not the result of an inhospitable culture, but rather of the failure of a model of co-operation between these liberal institutions and the dominant imperial powers to realise the popular aspirations of self-determination and freedom from foreign domination.

The failure of these institutions in the inter-war period and the subsequent failure of the secular nationalist, Soviet-supported and centrally planned economic and political institutions after the Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, left a political void. Many disillusioned and frustrated Arabs believed that their repeated failures required radical solutions. Like many social and political groups attempting to analyse the causes of the Arab failures, the conservative interpreters of Islam claimed that the Arabs had failed because they had strayed far from the righteous path of Islam. They proclaimed that Islam was the solution and called for the establishment of Islamic states.

The Iranian revolution in 1979 successfully challenged and discredited, in the eyes of many Iranians, another model of co-operation with the West. The Shah of Iran had pursued a model of modernisation and westernisation, with some success in terms of economic growth, but with serious failures in terms of socio-economic equity and popular participation in the political process. The demonstration effect of the success of the Iranian revolution that toppled the Shah had a profound impact on the debate between traditionalists and modernists in Islamic thought, with the traditionalists on the ascendancy. Islamic groups proliferated, intent not only on preaching the virtues of the so-called Islamic solutions, but also on mobilising support for their programmes of action. Some of these groups embarked on a programme of violence and terror.

Sociologists explain the strength of Islamic groups as partly a consequence of failed secular nationalism, partly a response to authoritarian rule that is oppressive of Islamic dissent, and partly the result of visible social and economic failures. In many countries, Islamic groups have become the most effective form of dissent. Their effectiveness in providing a whole range of social services where government services are lacking or inadequate have enabled them to attract support among the disaffected segments of the population.³⁰

TENSION AND AMBIVALENCE ABOUT ISLAM

The traditionalists among the Islamic groups reject the modernists' approach of harmonisation and synthesis of thought and ideas. They argue that Western concepts such as democracy and secularisation are incompatible with Islam because they rely on human rather than divine legislation and are formulated through secular rather than God-given laws.³¹

There are, however, some traditionalist Islamic groups that ostensibly accept democracy, at least as a means to contest and possibly win power. But there are also among the critics of democratic principles those who contest the very validity of these principles. There are also those in the Arab and Muslim world who are not anxious to espouse the Western multiparty system. They argue that in some circumstances such pluralism might only serve to deepen existing tribal or sectarian divisions (Rwanda, Sudan, Liberia,), and question whether the rule

of 51 per cent is a workable solution for many African and Asian societies. On certain moral questions, the critics of liberal democracy contend that it is hard to see why lax Western mores that threaten to destroy the family should be exported to the rest of the world under the banner of democracy.³²

But even democrats like Muhammad Iqbal, one of the leading Islamic modernist of the twentieth century, had serious reservations about Western liberal democracy. He accepted and welcomed the underlying principle of democratic institutions, but rejected their materialistic value orientation. He argued that Western democracy lacked ethical and spiritual concerns and is not superior to an authentically Muslim democratic system.³³

With the end of the Cold War, some observers prophesied an inevitable clash of civilisations, particularly between Western civilisation and Islamic culture. Media outlets dramatisation of some acts of violence attributed to individuals of Arab origin or Islamic faith encouraged a proliferation of academic debates on whether or not the Islamic culture was compatible with democracy. As suggested above such debates intensified and became more strident, less informative and unabashedly coloured by prejudice and ignorance after the 11 September attack against the USA.

The general view in the popular Western media is that Islam is incompatible with democracy. Statements from academics and scholars who assert that the history of Islamic states is one of unrelieved autocracy reinforce this tendency. Writing in the Washington Post long before the 11 September events, an influential American writer expressed a typically reductive view of Islam and asserted that Islam is clearly not compatible with Western representative democracy.³⁴ A well-known American reporter who claims to know the Middle East and reports about Islam to the West was not able to find a single 'moderate' Islamist in the Middle East. In her well-publicised book about Islam, she concluded that political alliances that contained Islamists were 'loony' and 'demented'.³⁵

Others point to the fact that Islamic theology emphasises the organic unity of state and society, and argue that the absence of a secular tradition in Muslim history makes Islam incompatible with modern democracy. Some have argued that this tradition leaves no room for secular policies that separate the sphere of religion from that of politics.

PROGRESSIVE TRADITIONS IN ISLAM

Scholars and serious students of Islam, however, assert that the Western view that Islam is incompatible with democracy is based on misunderstanding and misconception.³⁶

Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi, a Sunni Muslim thinker who established the major South Asian Islamic revivalist organisation, insisted on a proper understanding of the political aspects of Islam as a necessary prerequisite for understanding Islam and democracy. Islam's political system is based on three principles: Tawheed (unity of God), Risalat (Prophethood) and Khilafat (Caliphate). Tawheed is at the core of Islamic faith and simply means the conviction and witnessing that there is no God but God. In terms of political philosophy, this means that sovereignty can only derive from the will of God.

But, unlike European theocracies, the Islamic polity is not ruled by any one particular class but by the whole community of Muslims. Mawdudi's term for it is "theo-democracy" that is a divine democratic government. "The executive under this system of government is constituted by the General Will of the Muslims who have also the right to depose it."³⁷

Tawhid also explains another democratic concept: that of equality. Since all humans are equal before God, Islam has consistently opposed hierarchical and dictatorial political systems as anti-Islamic.

Islamic tradition consistently and clearly opposed arbitrary rule. Traditional doctors of Islamic jurisprudence have defined sovereignty on the basis of contractual commitments between the ruler and the ruled. The duty of obedience on the ruled is counterbalanced by a duty of fair and just governance on the ruler. The Prophet has encouraged diversity of opinions as a sign of God's mercy, and doctors of Islamic jurisprudence point to the existence of four mutually accepting different schools of Islamic jurisprudence, to argue that Islam does accommodate pluralism.³⁸

Many distinguished progressive thinkers have asserted the compatibility of Islam with modern thought and democratic principles of governance. In his 1952 book *Al-dimuqratiyyah fi'l-Islam* (Democracy in Islam), the celebrated Egyptian intellectual Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad pointed to the similarity between the liberal thought of Islam and that of Western thought as expressed through democratic values. More recently, a Shi'ite Muslim Persian thinker, Abdul Karim Soroush, and the Sunni Muslim exiled leader of Hezb al-Nahda (Party of the Renaissance), Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi, have come to symbolise modern reformers in Islam. They argue that Islam can and must be reconciled with modernity, and that it must be interpreted to encourage pluralism.³⁹

The Sudanese Muslim scholar Abdullahi An-Na'im argues that although constitutionalism is not specifically mentioned in the Koran, the just and good society the Koran prescribes requires constitutional arrangements that provide for legal opposition, challenging actions of leaders and recommending reforms.⁴⁰

These modern thinkers are following in the footsteps of earlier distinguished Islamic thinkers who vigorously campaigned for a progressive interpretation of Islamic principles.

This group of progressive reformers include Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-1896), Mohammed Abdu (1849-1905) and Abdul Rahman al-Kawakibi (1849-1903). They interpreted Islamic principles to accommodate the secular principles of democratic governance while maintaining human dignity, justice and the rule of law.

The Egyptian progressive Islamic thinker Mohammed Abdu believed that Islam was a religion fully compatible with modern rational thought, while preserving divine transcendence. Carrying further the thought of other progressive Islamic thinkers, such as Tahtawi, Khayr al-Din and al-Afghani, Abdu equated certain traditional concepts of Islamic thought with some of the ideas dominant in European thought: *maslaha* gradually turns into utility, *shura* into parliamentary democracy, *ijma'* into public opinion.⁴¹

The *shura*, in particular, is a central component of the Islamic political system. It was designed to provide for popular political participation and citizen influence in policy-making decisions. A '*shura*' is a consultative council, elected by the people. As one scholar put it: "The '*shura*' will assist and guide the Amir [leader]. It is obligatory for the Amir to administer the country with the advice of his *shura*. The Amir can retain office only so long as he enjoys the confidence of the people, and must resign when he loses this confidence. Every citizen has the right to criticise the Amir and his government, and all reasonable means for the expression of public opinion should be available."⁴² If Islamic states, argues the writer, appear not to construct their political structures in precisely this manner, this is not the fault of Islam and its ideals.

There is a consensus that Islam teaches principles of freedom, equality, human dignity, popular sovereignty and the rule of law, but that authoritarian political rule and restrictive interpretations of the Koran obstruct a liberal and modern application of its principles.⁴³

The project of Islam is nothing less than the establishment of a just society, which can only be achieved through democratic rule, when democracy is conceived as a moral project.

THE MARCH OF DEMOCRACY IN

THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE ARAB WORLD

Critics argue that the march of democracy did not have the same impact in the Arab world because of authoritarian tendencies in Arabic and Islamic cultures. But a culturally reductive view ignores the historical context of foreign involvement in the region and hinders a critical understanding of the opportunities for and constraints on democratisation in the region.

Still, democratisation has gained momentum in a number of Arab countries including Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Yemen, and non-Arabic Iran, and is returning to Lebanon, and progressing elsewhere.⁴⁴

Lebanon

The 1975 civil war in Lebanon put an end to this country's democratic culture. It was not until 1989 that a political agreement was signed to reform the country's political system by more equitably distributing political power among the various Christian and Muslim religious sects. With al-Taif accord, the Lebanese began trying to put the remnants of their political life back together, and elections were held in September 1992 for the first time since 1972.

Elections were held in August 2000, and on Sunday 3 September 2000 former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and his allies swept all 19 parliamentary seats in Beirut. Lebanese residents of the former Israeli-occupied zone in southern Lebanon voted for the first time since 1972. There were no elections during the civil war and the south, then under Israeli occupation, did not vote in the 1992 and 1996 elections. Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's Amal group and its Shiite Muslim rivals of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, that led the guerrilla war against the Israeli army occupying southern Lebanon, won most of the seats in the south. President Emile Lahoud named Hariri Prime Minister.

Egypt

In Egypt, the pace of democratisation progressed early and cautiously amid repeated use of violence by small groups seeking to topple the secular political system in place. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has increased freedoms for opposition parties and the press. There is a growing civil society and a diverse and intense political arena with 22 professional associations and 14 political parties.

With increased freedoms, the opposition has been able to successfully challenge government decisions and laws in the court system. Thus, when the government introduced a party-list proportional representation system (PR) electoral law, the opposition argued that the high threshold of eight per cent could negate the advantages of the PR system for most opposition parties. The 1984 election law was successfully challenged in court and overturned.

The creation of individually contested seats provided an opportunity for the smaller opposition parties to obtain seats by running locally popular candidates as independents. It also created an opening for parties that were not able to secure legal recognition from the government, as well as for activists with no affiliations to government or opposition parties.

Still, the opposition parties were able to challenge the law and, in May 1990, Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court ruled that the 1986-election law unfairly discriminated against independents, and declared the parliament elected under the law to be null and void. The Egyptian government complied and suspended the parliament – two years early – and prepared a new election law.

The new law restored the majority run-off system, and provided campaign opportunities for true independents and members of illegal parties. Several new parties were legalised, and the government agreed to double the amount of airtime available to the opposition. But confrontation between the government and the Muslim Brotherhood, outbreaks of violence, and the withdrawal of opposition candidates amid charges of civil liberties abuses, corruption and intimidation, marred the 1995 legislative elections.

Following the September 1999 re-election of President Mubarak, in an uncontested race in which he was the only candidate, to a fourth six-year term in office, he promised major political changes designed to deepen and consolidate democratic reforms. He also pledged a more open and rejuvenated government committed to broader popular participation in the political process.

Following a Constitutional Court ruling, the Egyptian government moved to dissolve parliament and to organise legislative elections in November 2000 under judicial supervision. Egyptians went to the polls over a period of several weeks to ensure adequate judicial supervision of the elections. Critics claim that random acts of violence prevented many people, mainly supporters of Islamic candidates, from voting, and that without these acts of violence the number of Islamic candidates elected in the new parliament would have been considerably higher. Still, despite these sporadic acts of violence, opposition and independent candidates agreed that the latest parliamentary elections were the most open and most democratic in Egypt's contemporary history. The ruling party suffered unexpected losses but retained a comfortable majority, while the opposition candidates and independent candidates, especially Islamic candidates, made unprecedented gains.

Jordan

In Jordan, the late King Hussein broadened the democratic basis of political participation in the country in 1989. The November 1989 elections produced a victory for Islamist candidates in 34 out of the 80 seats in parliament. Even so, the King decided to pursue political liberalisation further by creating a royal commission to draft a new 'National Charter' that was proclaimed in December 1990. The Charter called for democracy and granted Jordanians the right to form political parties. King Abdullah promised to continue the democratisation reforms started by his late father. In the July 1999 local elections, the main Islamist opposition in Jordan, Islamic Action Front, scored important victories by winning majorities on the municipal councils in three of Jordan's main cities: Irbid, Zarqa and Russeifa.

Tunisia

Tunisia started the democratisation process in 1981 when President Habib Bourguiba allowed multiparty elections. As economic difficulties grew and bread riots intensified, the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) gained ground. After a series of government changes, Prime Minister Zine-al-Abidine Ben Ali had several doctors declare President Bourguiba's absolute incapacity to govern, and then assumed the presidency. Since that time President Ben Ali has been introducing reforms to the political system, but he remained weary of the MTI, which formed the Renaissance Party (Hizb al-Nahdah), but failed to secure government recognition. The political parties that do exist, besides the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), are mainly small left-wing parties. Admittedly, President Ben Ali has moved Tunisia closer to a multiparty democracy than ever before, though not as far as the Islamic movement would like to see. Critics say that Ben Ali's refusal to recognise the Islamist party may cause more harm than good.

Algeria

In Algeria, the process of democratisation made important strides from 1988 until January 1992 when it was brought to a halt. As in many other countries, economic grievances led to widespread protests that intensified in October 1988 and spread across the country. President Chadli Bendjedid responded by introducing economic as well as political reforms. The constitution was revised to allow for political pluralism, thus ending the monopoly the National Liberation Front had held for the previous 26 years. The government allowed the establishment of new parties and granted the press greater freedom. By 1989 many new parties had come into being, including the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) (Islamic Salvation Front), headed by Abbas Madani.

The FIS put together an efficient organisation not only for contesting elections, but also for providing social services to the poor and marginalised, and emergency aid for the disaster-stricken, especially after the 1989 earthquake. In the process, it developed a strong and loyal constituency. In the municipal and provincial elections of 12 June 1990, the FIS scored a surprising victory, winning 67 per cent of the provinces (as opposed to 14 per cent for the ruling FLN) and 55 per cent of the municipalities (versus 32 per cent for the FLN). Although the legislative elections were postponed from June to December 1991, the FIS swept to a second victory. It won 188 of the 231 seats decided in the first round of the elections, just 28 short of a majority needed in the 430-member parliament. A run-off election was scheduled for 16 January 1992.

President Bendjedid remained committed to full democratisation. The army, however, decided otherwise. Bendjedid resigned on 11 January and the newly formed State Security Council cancelled the elections and installed Muhammad Boudiaf, an exiled former National Liberation Front dissident, as head of the presidential council. The security forces arrested several thousands Islamists and dissolved local assemblies. A court ruling, in March 1992 officially dissolved the FIS itself. On 29 June 1992, Boudiaf was assassinated and the country plunged into horrifying violence, often perpetrated against innocent people.

In 1999, and after an estimated 80,000 people had been killed in the violence, there was hope for an easing of the violence and the beginning of reconciliation. A presidential election was scheduled for 15 April with 11 candidates representing different political opinions and a promise from the army not to interfere. As the election date approached candidates began withdrawing and, less than 24 hours before the election, six of the seven remaining presidential candidates withdrew. Abdelaziz Bouteflika, a 62-year-old former foreign minister who returned to Algeria after living in exile for 20 years, was elected president with no competition. President Bouteflika promised reconciliation and democratisation.⁴⁵ In a popular referendum organised in September 1999, President Bouteflika received strong support for his programme of reconciliation.

Yemen

The Republic of Yemen was created by the unification of North and South Yemen on 22 May 1990. One year later a new constitution provided for the establishment of a multiparty political system, guarantees for women to vote, freedom of political expression and association, and a popularly elected House of Representatives. The first free elections were held in 1993.

Iran

In May 1997, Iranians elected moderate and reform-minded Mohammed Khatami as president. The democratisation process was confirmed with the organisation, in February 1999, of Iran's first local elections in 20 years. About 330,000 candidates, including 5,000 women, contested more than 200,000 seats in the Islamic Councils that run local government in cities, towns and villages. Supporters of the democratisation process and reforms undertaken by President Mohammed Khatami scored important victories, winning every seat in Teheran, and most seats on councils in the rest of the country.⁴⁶ Still popular and student demonstrations continued to demand greater and faster reforms. In the February 2000 parliamentary elections, the reform-minded candidates and supporters of President Khatami scored important electoral victories, giving President Khatami the majority he needed to try to carry out his promised reform programme. The implementation of such reforms will not be only a matter of passing legislation but must also secure the approval of the 12-man Guardian Council that has opposed radical reforms. In addition, President Khatami must share power with Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, the supreme leader, a post that embodies the clergy's domination of Iranian politics, security and foreign policy. In June 2001, President Khatami was re-elected and vowed to continue his reforms.

Kuwait

In June 1999, Kuwaiti ruler Sheikh Jaber announced that Kuwait was extending the franchise to women. At least seven women have already announced plans to run for Parliament in 2003, the first year they would be eligible. With an elected parliament and women running for and holding office, Kuwait is moving ahead with its democratisation reforms.

CONCLUSION

The events of 11 September 2001 dramatised the absence of a clear understanding in the West of the root causes of instability and violence in the Middle East, as well as the growing tendency to dismiss the Arab culture and Islam as incompatible with freedom and democracy. While these two tendencies reveal the failure of the West to accept its responsibility for contributing to the context of instability and violence, they also challenge the Arab regimes and Muslim countries to mount a credible and sustainable response. The most effective and truly lasting response can only come from a renewed and sustained serious commitment to the process of democratisation that has already started in many countries in the Middle East and the Arab world.

Democratisation, however, continues to face challenges. Secular nationalist ideologies have driven Islamist groups underground, and, at the same time, failed to fulfil people's aspirations for democratic reforms, and social and economic equity. As long as significant segments of the population feel that their voices are not being heard and their concerns not addressed, tension and conflict will continue to impede the consolidation of democratic reforms.

In many countries, the powers of the judicial and legislative branches are constrained, and opposition parties have only limited access to the media. New political parties must receive governmental permission to become legal. The executive office continues to be largely uncontested.

Critics point out that in democratising countries, electoral designs are being used to redraw electoral district lines to influence the outcome of legislative elections and affect the chances of opposition parties to successfully compete for seats. Most contested Arab elections have been using the winner-takes-all systems that tend to distort the result of the actual votes given to well-known large political parties. For example, in the 1996 Palestine Legislative Council elections, which used an at-large system, candidates running on the largest Fatah slate received only 30 per cent of the votes, but wound up with 58 per cent of the 88 seats.

Critics continue to press for reforms and greater protection for human rights. Some have criticised the Egyptian government's continued use of emergency rule as incompatible with democratisation, while others concede the Egyptian government argument that emergency rule is a necessary barrier to the advance of religious extremism.⁴⁷

The Arab-Israeli conflict and the Cold War clearly played a role in, and were used to justify the suppression of democratisation initiatives in the region. Although the Cold War is over, and the general principles of a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflicts have received the support of all parties concerned at the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, the conflict rages on.⁴⁸

There are more than 2.4 million Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, a third of whom live in 61 camps set up in Jordan, the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon and Syria. The unresolved questions of displacement and statelessness of these refugees have served to delay democratisation reforms in the Arab world and will continue to remain a serious obstacle to democratisation.

The absence of a comprehensive peace in the region that addresses not only the Palestine question and its various consequences but also peace relations between Israel and Lebanon

and Israel and Syria, will remain a serious constraint on initiatives for democratisation throughout the region.

The unresolved conflicts between Iraq, Libya and Sudan, on the one hand, and the United States, on the other, will undoubtedly delay the emergence of any serious initiatives for change. A growing number of observers are increasingly critical of the continued sanctions against Iraq, and point to the growing human toll in death and suffering they have inflicted on the people of Iraq.

The failure of various governments in the Middle East and the Arab world to broaden the basis of their popular support, provide more avenues for power-sharing, and address chronic issues of corruption, and socio-economic inequities, can only add to people's distrust of, and disillusionment with, their governments. It also plays into the hands of groups advocating a fundamentalist and restrictive interpretation of Islam and seeking to establish a more restrictive political order.

The strategic interests of the industrialised world have traditionally figured prominently in the geopolitical calculations of Western involvement in the Middle East. During the Cold War, Western powers adopted policies designed more to pursue and safeguard these interests than to promote initiatives for democratisation. This led to alliances with less than democratic regimes and with even anti-Western Islamic groups.

Islamic groups began to challenge secular Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s and received the support of the Western opponents of Arab nationalism. The failure of secular Arab nationalism, and the weakening of the leftist opposition following the collapse of communism, left the field wide open for Islamic groups that had organised and developed themselves to emerge as the most effective opposition groups.

Western support for democratisation in the Arab world may be lukewarm as a result of genuine fear that if Islamic groups came to power, even through democratic election, as they were about to do in Algeria, Western strategic interests would be jeopardised.

But many Arab democrats say that with the end of the Cold War, there is no reason why the West and international donors should be crippled by a culturally reductive view of the Arabic and Islamic cultures.

Supporting democratisation in the Arab world can only promote popular participation, human development, responsible governance and positive contributions to global governance,

including co-operative and mutually respectful relations with the international community, including the West.

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- 1 Guardian, 16 October 2001.
 - 2 Harry N. Howard *The King-Crane Commission: An American Inquiry in the Middle East*, Beirut, Khayat's, 1963, p. 218.
 - 3 See the full text of the King-Crane Commission Report in George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*, New York, Capricorn Books, 1965, pp. 443-458. See also Harry N. Howard, *opt. cit.*
 - 4 Guardian, 11 September 1999.
 - 5 See Ibrahim Sa'ada, *Akhbar el Youm* (in Arabic), 13 October 2001.
 - 6 David Hirst, 'Few Arabs Share bin Laden's Fundamentalism, but His Militancy on Palestine and Iraq Strike a Chord that Resonates Widely', *Guardian*, 9 October 2001.
 - 7 *Ibid.*
 - 8 'There isn't a target in Afghanistan worth a \$1 million missile', *Guardian*, 10 October 2001.
 - 9 *Hard Talk*, BBC, 1 November 2001.
 - 10 Anthony Lewis, 'Is There an Answer?', *New York Times*, 30 October 2001.
 - 11 'UN Official Blasts Iraqi Sanctions', BBC, 30 September 1999.
 - 12 David Edward's interview with Denis Halliday in *Zmagazine*, March 2000.
 - 13 *Akhbar al-Youm* (in Arabic), Cairo, 20 October 2001.
 - 14 See Thomas Friedman's piece in the *New York Times*, reprinted in the *Guardian* on 12 October 2001.
 - 15 Fareed Zakaria, *BBC World News*, 23 October 2001.
 - 16 C. Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 111-12.

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