Arabs and the West

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Arab societies in general still live in the pre-industrial times and derive most of their cultural values and traditions from times long gone, making it hard for them to relate to the world in a realistic and rational way. In contrast, western societies are a product of times and cultures that cannot stop changing, making it hard for most Europeans and Americans to relate to the past in realistic ways. Consequently, neither Arabs nor westerners can understand the other and communicate with them in a rational manner, causing fear, apprehension, and mutual suspicion to spread on both sides of the political and cultural divides. This paper intends to explain this dilemma and identify the forces that try to perpetuate it indefinitely.

Meanwhile, political, and sociocultural developments that caused the Arab secular state to fail, the Israeli colonialist enterprise in Palestine, the gulf wars of 1993 and 2003, during which a western coalition led by America invaded and occupied Iraq, have caused Arabs in general and Muslims in particular to develop deep anti-American and British feelings. These are feelings that encourage most Arabs and Muslims to close their minds to whatever the United States says and claims, while opening their eyes to whatever America does in their region. In addition, western pressure on Arab states to democratize and globalize, and a deep feeling of impotence and humiliation have caused a fundamentalist religious revival. The Arab mind, being unable to deal with these confusing developments, was forced to go into hiatus, where it lives in a closed mental environment and moves into directions that undermine its capacity to think freely, relate to the world outside its cocoon, and be creative.

Arab liberals and conservatives have been fighting a war of ideas and perceptions since the mid-1960s, with the conservative forces winning most of the battles, especially among the older generation, the fatally confused young men and women, and the hopelessly poor and desperate masses. If current socioeconomic and sociopolitical conditions, and sociocultural trends were to continue unchanged for another generation, the religiously conservative forces are likely to win a decisive victory and take the Arab mind with them to the Middle ages. And if this were to happen, any further talk about democracy, freedom, or genuine sociocultural transformation in most Arab countries would be an exercise in futility.

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Iran represents the best image of the future that awaits Arabs in general if nothing fundamental and daring is done soon to open Arab societies, free the Arab people from corruption and oppression, and liberate the Arab mind. Iran, after more than 40 years of religious rule, has made little progress; by the end of 2019, the number of Iranians living under the poverty line was estimated at 18% of the population, unemployment rates were high and rising, particularly among the young, and an estimated 2 million more people had become drug addicts. In the middle of 2007, the second largest oil producing state in the Gulf was unable to supply enough gas for Iranian motorists to run their cars, forcing it to institute a rationing system that caused widespread demonstrations.

Due to these developments and others, the Arab mind was left to the winds of ignorance and religious fundamentalism to shape and control. Since this process started more than five decades ago, the Arab mind was closed through a systematic process of pressure, coercion, brain washing, and a bad educational system to avoid facing reality and perpetuate the status quo. Forces that are took the lead in closing the Arab mind include the following:

1. A voluntary movement toward religious conservatism led by indigenous religious forces and financed by the Arab oil producing states. These religious forces claim that only Islam can provide a solution to the current Arab dilemma; and therefore, they call for transforming Arab society along a fading, yet revered image of a past that may have never exited as imagined or performed as believed.

2. An active movement of cultural particularism led by nationalist forces that claim that Arab unity is the only force capable of liberating the Arab people, uniting their land, and restoring their past glory. It is a movement that bases its rationale on mistaken notions about the past and misconceived ideas about the future; it claims that the Arabic-Islamic culture enjoys superior characteristics that make it most qualified to lead the Arab masses toward political unity, military strength, economic development, and scientific progress; and that Arabs have maintained unity of their land until the West colonized and divided them. And in so claiming, they ignore the currents of change and transformation that dominate the world of today, as well as the impact of globalization on all aspects of live. In an attempt to isolate themselves within their cultural dark alleys, the national forces began to call for the formation of a "culture of resistance" to resist globalization and stop the transformation it causes to indigenous

cultures. As a consequence, Arab nationalist who led the process of cultural, political, and economic interaction with the rest of the world since the end of the First World War, are progressively becoming unable to relate to the world they live in a rational and realistic way. And having appointed themselves guardians of Arab culture, they have moved to condemn everyone who disagrees with them. And while they follow outdated ideas and notions, they use empty slogans to impress their followers and others who feel frustrated by the failure and incompetent Arab regimes. Heightened fear of foreign threat to Arabism, real and perceived outside attempts to undermine Arab culture and identity, and Israeli and American occupation of Arab land have given added legitimacy to slogans of Arabism and cultural particularism.

3. A repressive state system that tends to abuse people's human rights, tolerate no criticism, oppose genuine democracy, undermine political participation by the masses, severely limit freedom of speech and freedom of the press, and disregards call for open dialogue and association in society. And while the Arab state system and its organs of repression do their best to intimidate intellectuals, the conservative religious forces do not hesitate to use rhetoric and real threats to silence criticism of their ideas and slogans, causing freedom of expression to be fatally undermined and intellectuals' influence to be minimized.

4. A largely traditional educational system that works to reinforce outdated ideas, cultural traditions, ways of thinking, conspiracy theories, and rigid religious beliefs; it tends to emphasizes memorization of information at the expense of critical thinking, creativity, and innovation.

5. A misguided American policy that supports Israel blindly, ignores Palestinian human and political rights, treats most Arab regimes as surrogate states, and deals with most Arab leaders as agents. America is also responsible for turning Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen into failed states. Moreover, America still occupies parts of Syria and confiscates its oil, insisting on keeping it a failed state. This is the most powerful state in the world, applying the most viscous policy developed in history to deepens Arab sense of humiliation, encourages radicalism and extremism, and undermines Arab forces of moderation and liberalism. Meanwhile the Europeans, Particularly Britain and France, while showing sympathy with the Arabs, they help America implement its vicious and inhumane policies in Middle East Region.

While the fundamentalist and nationalist forces demand that the Arabic-Islamic culture and heritage be revived and respected and accepted without debate, the educational and political systems intentionally and unintentionally work to reinforce such demands through inaction and ignorance. The progressive and liberal forces, meanwhile, are intimidated and denied the opportunity to express their views openly and challenge the others' views on the bases of reason, scientific facts and rationality. The mass media, being the only venue to express one's views and promote new ideas and reach the targeted audience, is a forbidden land as far as pro-democracy, non-traditional Arab intellectuals are concerned.

Deep sociocultural divides in society usually make it difficult to articulate national policies that enjoy near consensus or widespread popular support; they make it even more difficult to launch comprehensive strategies for societal transformation. "In an age of accelerating change, and facing tremendous external and internal challenges, the Arabs will not be able to participate positively in contemporary life and to respond creatively to the challenges of the times without undergoing a total transformation in which the cultural element plays an important, if not a primary part." (Zurayk, "Cultural Change and Transformation of Arab Society," in *The Arab Future: Critical Issues* 10-11)

Democracy, most enlightened people tend to think, could be presented as the right solution to the societal dilemma facing Arab and non-Arab Third World states. While this might be true in an economically advanced and socially developed and culturally homogeneous societies like Taiwan and South Korea, democracy is not a solution to multiethnic, multi-religious and multi-sectarian states, as well as to societies that suffer political and economic and social underdevelopment. When former Iranian president Mohammed Khatami was asked in 1999 about the reasons for lack of economic development in his country, he said, "It is impossible to have economic development in a socially and politically underdeveloped society." Promoters of democracy in Third World states need to be reminded that western democracy was a major byproduct of the socioeconomic and sociocultural transformations, including the religious Reformation ideas, that swept Europe between the 16th and 17th centuries; no Arab or Islamic society has experienced such a transformation or about to go through a similar one.

Political scientists tell us that for democracy to succeed it has to have certain conditions; noted among them are: the existence of a fairly large, conscious and confident middle class,

political plurality, regular elections to manage the peaceful transfer of power in society, and a free press. Based on my studies and observations, there is another major condition, a culture of tolerance. But history seems to indicate that all ideologically committed leaders and ethnic groups and racial states do not believe in or practice tolerance. In fact, I argued in my book, "The Making of History" that the greatest success of democracy in the West was not realized by establishing itself as a political system of governance, but by transforming itself into a social value and a cultural tradition. If democracy succeeds a sociocultural value, it will succeed as a political system; and if democracy fails as a sociocultural value, it will certainly fail as a political system.

The only way to win the fight against radical Islam is to pull the rug from underneath its feet by giving younger generations a better education and, in the process, transform their cultures and worldviews. Improving the economic and social conditions of the poor people and transforming political systems to be based on social contracts that regulate relations between the rulers and the ruled are two strategic tasks that cry for attention. Radicals throughout history were able to define with clarity what they stand against but have failed to define with coherence what they stand for; they are better at knowing their enemies than knowing their friends. As a consequence, radical forces have always lacked a program for reform geared toward helping the people they claim to be fighting for. This means that if radicals win the war of ideas and manage to control the state system, they will lead the peoples of the region into a wilderness of chaos and conflict that nurtures more war, enmity, and hatred than peace, tolerance, and love.

No sociopolitical ideology like nationalism, or socioeconomic ideology like communism, or sociocultural ideology like religion can be tolerant of dissent or accept religious and racial equality, and thus respect the democratic principles. It can, however, establish a democracy of the masters like the one practiced today in Iran and Israel. While in Iran only those who uphold the world of God and obey the orders of his earthy representatives are granted the right to govern and given the honor to serve state ideology; and in Israel, only Jews are considered full citizens of the state and have the right to rule over the land's indigenous people and the states' occupied subjects. If radical Islam wins its cultural and political fight, it will establish its own justice that recognizes no authority except that of its mysterious God,

whose commandments and word are interpreted and conveyed to believers by unelected self-appointed representatives.

Since Islamic societies lack the experience to deal with most issues of our times, such as political democracy, economic development, freedom of speech, the rule of law, the role of the press in society, and the ethics of modern science and technology, fundamentalism as a sociopolitical movement is doomed to fail in the long run. In reality, attempts to rejuvenate Islam have boiled down to a cloudy program to remold the present and shape the future in the image of a glorious but fading past. However, religious movement based on faith and fate cannot fail; the promise their followers no material or political gain on earth, and therefore, they cannot be held accountable for the consequences of their actions; the only thing they promise their diehard followers is a place in Heaven in the afterlife. A believer therefore has to wait for the afterlife to find out if his or her religion is able to deliver.

To have a fighting chance of winning the war against extremism and injustice, the secular forces in the Arab world must have the freedom to fully participate in the political process and the social, cultural, and economic life of society. They must also have the freedom to write and publish, to organize and mobilize, to debate and challenge culturally and religiously conservative men and women, and to criticize government performances and hold state officials accountable. And their right to do so has to be guaranteed by law and protected by state agencies.

Prof. Rabie is a distinguished professor of International Political Economy; he attended 5 universities and taught at 10 others on four continents. He has published 58 books, about 200 scholarly papers, and over 2000 newspaper articles. Books are 16 in English, one in Albanian, and 41 in Arabic. English Books include Saving Capitalism and Democracy; Global Economic and Cultural Transformation; A Theory of Sustainable Sociocultural and Economic Development; The Global Debt Crisis and its Socioeconomic Implications. (Palgrave Macmillan 2013-2017) One of the English books, "History of Racism", was translated and published in six other languages: German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Polish. Arabic Books include 3 poetry collections, 2 novels, and a story; the rest is mostly academic books and collections of ideas and reflections. Prof. Rabie is president of the Arab Thought Council in Washington, DC, a member of the Arab Thought Forum, and a fellow of the Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation since 1992. Grants and scholarships financed his education

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