

Arab Culture and the Future

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The Arab world looks like a complicated puzzle that is hard to understand and harder to solve; in fact, no one seems to know with any degree of confidence where and how to start working on solving it, or if a solution is actually possible. This makes the most certain thing about the Arab world is that its future is most uncertain. Internal and external forces of change seem to have agreed to pull the region and its peoples and states in different, yet opposing and largely contradictory directions. However, the clash between these forces leads to increased political instability, state ineffectiveness, economic stagnation, and moral and cultural deterioration; the result of which is the spread of poverty and the widening of the sociocultural divides and socioeconomic gaps in society.

One of the main reasons for the uncertainty of the Middle East future is the multiplicity of forces that are competing to dominate the region and affect the course of its sociopolitical, socioeconomic and sociocultural direction. However, the Arab masses and their supposedly intellectual leadership, who have more to gain from positive change and most to lose from lack thereof, are doing very little if anything to protect their interests or articulate a vision for the future for their nation. Arab states and leaders in general are in no position to participate actively in protecting their national interests; in fact, no Arab state has developed a clear notion of its national interest. And without knowing their interests, states cannot develop plans to defend or promote their any interests. The only interest that Arab leaders know and are committed to protect at all costs is to remain in power and use whatever political and economic power they have to gain more of the same, and employ both powers to appease, suppress and corrupt potential leaders and enlightened forces of change. And while they seem to be succeeding in suppressing free thought and enlightened ideas from reaching the masses, they are failing miserably in appeasing the fundamentalist forces or even containing their influence.

Problems facing Arab people today are many; some of which are economic in nature like high unemployment rates and low labor productivity; others are sociocultural like high illiteracy and population growth rates and widespread corruption; and more are political and security related like lack of political legitimacy, civil wars and failure to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict or deal with the worsening Iraqi situation. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has had in fact a catastrophic impact, not only on Iraq, but also on the region, causing international terrorism to spread, anti-Americanism in Arab and Muslim states to deepen, and all issues related to economic development and the transformation of cultures, including the political culture, to be neglected and forgotten. I believe that without the sudden influx of trillions of dollars during the last few years due to the tremendous increase in the price of oil, the situation in the Arab world would have gotten much worse than what it is today; it would most likely have drowned the entire region into chaos and conflict.

As The Arabs enter a new phase of aimless sociocultural and economic transformation, Arab states enter a deepened state of political instability and heightened security threats. Recent developments indicate that Arab states are facing serious challenges that threaten their very existence. While the United States is increasing pressure on Arab rulers to transform their cultures, economies and politics in America's image, Islamic fundamentalist forces are pulling the Arab masses toward living and thinking in times long gone, denying them the opportunity to relate to the world in which they live in a meaningful way. Meanwhile, forces of traditional nationalism are calling with increasing intensity for the development of a "culture of resistance," to face globalization and reject its economic and cultural impact on Arab societies. Israel, on the other hand, is becoming more aggressive and expansionist, rejecting all calls for peace with its Arab neighbors on the basis of recognized UN resolutions and the internationally sanctioned "land for peace" formula. And as the situation continues to deteriorate further, non-state actors are becoming more numerous and influential.

I believe that the fight in the Middle East is over values, ideas and ideals, but the West is losing that war; and, in the process, it is causing substantial harm to the indigenous forces of change and modernization. By claiming that the war is for the sake of justice, human rights and

democracy, while acting as if the Arab people deserve no justice and have no political or economic or human rights, the West in general and the United States in particular, is undermining its own credibility and weakening enlightened Arab intellectuals who are the West's true allies in the fight for freedom, democracy, sociocultural transformations, and economic development. Most of the so-called moderate Arab leaders are in no position to help the West or themselves; they are largely corrupt autocrats who do not believe in democracy; and therefore, are unwilling to respect the human rights of their peoples or work for genuine development or social justice. And due to the new Arab media and satellite TV stations, all Arab leaders have lost whatever credibility and legitimacy they may have had in the past in the eyes of the Arab masses. Arab leaders enjoy neither the trust nor the respect of the majority of the Arab people; they are feared but not respected. And fear can neither build trust nor can it facilitate the articulation of social contracts to tie people together and to the state and create communities of shared interests and common values. Globalization, meanwhile, is being allowed to aggravate poverty and social injustice, nurture suspicion and conspiracy theories, and cause socioeconomic gaps to widen and sociocultural divides to deepen in every society.

The Middle East region, many Americans and Europeans claim, needs a value revolution; in fact, nothing less than a genuine sociocultural revolution to transform the entire human environment and relations and worldviews will do to give people a fighting chance to catch up with the rest of the world. However, sociocultural transformations cannot and should not be attempted from the outside, or be initiated by foreigners because they tend to replace impressions for facts and rhetoric for action. Cultures encompass values and traditions and convictions and attitudes that are most resistant to change; they are also very difficult to understand and analyze without placing them in their proper historical and civilizational contexts. Cultures should be left to indigenous intellectuals, educators and non-traditional leaders to transform; otherwise, the masses will view outside intervention as cultural imperialism and treat it as political and economic hegemony.

No matter how hard western states and the American media may try to do to undermine the influence and rationale of political Islam, they cannot defeat people willing to die for a holy

cause they believe in. Radical Muslims opposing US policies are convinced that they are fighting God's war and, therefore, they believe that God is on their side. And since no power is capable of defeating God, they are convinced that they will ultimately win their fight against all enemies. They further believe that if they die fighting the enemies of God before final victory is achieved; they will go to heaven, the ultimate destination sought by every believer. Therefore, believers are winners in this life if they defeat their enemies, and winners in the afterlife if they die fighting their enemies. "Islam is the solution" is a slogan that no other slogan can outmaneuver at this time.

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 society like Taiwan or South Korea, democracy is not a solution to multiethnic states and to the politically and economically and socially underdeveloped societies. 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 Reformation, that swept Europe between the 15th and 18th centuries; no Arab or Islamic society has experienced such a thing.

Political scientists tell us that for democracy to succeed it has to have certain conditions; noted among them: the existence of a fairly large and 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 "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.

While some western apologists for certain Arab regimes may claim that some Arab states are on their way to democracy, the facts on the ground and the historical trends do not support such claims. None of the conditions of democracy mentioned above exists today in any of the Arab or Islamic countries or any other largely agricultural and mostly underdeveloped society in the world. Democracy in fact has no future in all states and societies that still live under socioeconomic and sociocultural conditions resembling those of pre-industrial times.

Conclusion

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 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 and enmity than 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 cultural and 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 are interpreted and conveyed to believers by unelected self-appointed representatives.

If current socioeconomic and sociopolitical and sociocultural conditions and trends in Arab states were to continue unchanged for another decade or two, the religiously conservative forces will more likely win a decisive victory. And if this were to happen, any further talk about genuine sociocultural or sociopolitical transformation in Arab countries would become an exercise in futility.

Since Islamic societies lack the experience to deal with most issues of our times, such as political democracy, economic development, freedom of speech, 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, as a religious, faith based movement, fundamentalism cannot fail; it promises its followers no material or even political gains on earth, and therefore, it cannot be held accountable for the consequences of its actions; the only thing it promises its 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.

In fact, many of the changes taking place in Arab and other Muslim countries today have become very complicated; they seem to defy rational analysis. Response to internal and external challenges has been so weak; it reflects abdication of rights to defend communal values and national interests. Attempts to react even to the most threatening challenges have been formulated in broad, theatrical terms that lack both the honesty to acknowledge reality and the political will to face it and deal with it. Manifestations that are alien to the Muslim experience, and others that are critical of the performance of regimes, are being either ignored or denounced as the product of evil forces. Liberal intellectuals are being co-opted, coerced, or forced to seek refuge in passivity, often in countries other than their own.

Arab intellectuals who believe that Arab unity is the shortest way to building a strong, progressive nation capable of meeting the challenges of the times are very weak and lack the courage to act. Governments, in contrast, seem determined to deny the national forces the right to establish political parties and interact with the masses and seek their support. In addition, the strict limits imposed on the press have practically eliminated the possibility to develop a forum where ideas could be freely expressed, new thinking promoted, and constructive dialogue started and sustained. Since Arab governments have continued to follow this course, fundamentalism was able to deepen its roots, attract more recruits and become the dominant social force. In certain instances, it has even become the most influential political force, as the cases of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Taliban in Afghanistan, Hamas in Palestine and the Religious Courts in Somalia demonstrate, raising the possibility that many countries might be on their way to becoming fragmented and dominated by non-state actors.

In fact, continued suppression of freedoms by Arab governments and lack of credible political and economic opportunity have pushed some intellectuals from all ideological shades to lend their support to the fundamentalist forces because they are the only force willing and able to challenge the establishment; intellectuals, however, do this not out of conviction but as a result of frustration and despair. In such an environment, it was only natural for radical ideas to proliferate, without either the sanction of the governments or the approval of the social critics.

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 sociocultural life of society. They must have the freedom to write and publish, to organize and mobilize, to debate and challenge culturally and religiously conservative views, 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.

Liberals and conservatives in the Arab world have been fighting a war of ideas since the mid-1960s, with the conservatives winning most of the battles, particularly among the religiously minded and the hopelessly poor and largely ignorant Arab masses. While the nature

of the message of the liberal and national forces and its vagueness have been largely responsible for their failure, the simplicity of the religious forces message has contributed to their success, and thus to their ability to win the battle of ideas. While secular governments and national forces can and do often fail when they disappoint their constituents and appear unable to live up to popular expectations, religious forces do not usually fail; they seldom promise people much in life on earth. The true promises the religious forces usually make and swear to deliver are those that supposedly await the believers in the afterlife. To find out how real such promises are, one must die without sin and, in the current political climate, often accept death as a result of killing a perceived enemy in war.

Therefore, if current socioeconomic and sociopolitical conditions and trends were to continue unchallenged for another decade or two, the religiously and culturally conservative forces would be in a good position to win a decisive victory. Non-state actors are more likely to dominate the scene, war between such actors and Israel would become more intense and frequent, and forces of terrorism would gain new bases and spread further. And if this were to happen, any further talk about winning the war on terrorism and causing a genuine sociocultural transformation of Arab societies would become an exercise in futility, at least for decades to come.

Every nation that experiences major setbacks emanating from the failure of its predominant ideology to meet the challenges of its times, causes its people to lose faith in their sociopolitical ideologies and seek salvation in religion, the most resilient force in the life of most people. And this in turn gives religious fundamentalism the opportunity to rise, take the initiative and claim the future. However, the future fundamentalism usually envisions is one that would be built in the image of a past that had never experienced the challenges posed by the present. In addition, changes that fundamentalist movements usually espouses are behavior oriented rather than scientific or economic oriented, which make them less able to deal with the complexities of life. While changes inspired by fundamentalism are likely to influence the attitudes and relationships of many people, they are less likely to develop the systems and build the institutions needed to meet the ever increasing challenges of the times.

A fundamentalist society may become more ethical and moral and seeks less pleasure, it is doubtful, however, that it will ever become more productive and able to bridge the socioeconomic gap in society or the sociocultural and technological gaps with the advanced nations of the world. The lack of new ideas on the one hand, and hashing and rehashing of the past on the other, make religious fundamentalism a route to escape reality rather than a positive reaction to the challenges posed by it; and illusion rather than a practical solution.

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