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Heartbreak and Hope

There is a battle raging within the Arab world whose outcome is of the utmost importance for the entire globe. This struggle between the forces of democracy and authoritarianism, modernity and stagnation, is not so different in kind from the titanic conflicts that have shaped the lives of many other lands. But the specific Middle Eastern version of such events is also quite distinct from what happened elsewhere.

What is going on in the Middle East today is part of the great, centuries-long transition wrought by secularism, industrialization, democratization, urbanization, globalization, and all the other historic changes that have shaped the modern world everywhere on the planet. Indeed, the struggle over the Middle East may be the last of these great battles over alternative futures. Within each country, the issue has been what kind of society and polity would prevail there. On every continent, the regional question to be resolved was whether a single country, leader, or ideology could dominate that vast landmass or even, using it as a base, the entire world.

For example, Europe's political, social, and ideological throes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave rise to international tidal waves that carried violence to every corner of the planet. Three world wars, including the Cold War, as well as fascism and communism, arose in the strife of that great debate over how people should and would live their lives.

Compared to Europe's upheavals, such catastrophic events as September 11 and the three wars emanating from Iraq are mere ripples.[1] But the great battle over what system and worldview will dominate the Middle

East is happening now, and this struggle will probably be our era's central drama.

In the long term, the outcome may be inevitable for the Middle East, ending with the triumph of the same basic positive trends that prevailed in Europe and elsewhere. Getting there, however, is what history is about. How many decades this will take and how many thousands of people will die in the process still hang in the balance.

At present, though, Arab liberalism, purported to be the inevitable victor, remains enormously weak. Ammar Abdulhamid, a Syrian novelist who started the Tharwa Project, one of the main Internet sites for reformers, said the movement is caught between powerful regimes that hold tightly on to power and religious extremists who are increasingly popular. He said, "Arab liberals are indeed under siege, and that's putting it mildly. [They are] fighting to retain the last foothold that liberal values still have in the Arab world."[2]

One Arab liberal admits, "Are we a small minority? Certainly, for now. Still, this movement is not a movement of a few liberal professors living and preaching in the United States and Europe. It certainly has a 'popular' and 'militant' aspect which was missing in earlier movements."[3] Be that as it may, while they are becoming increasingly more active, there is still not a single liberal leader or movement anywhere in the Arab world able to mobilize large groups of people. Perhaps a "silent majority" of Arabs and Muslims do want democracy and modern society in the Western sense of those words, but it is also possible that such people are really only a "silent minority."

The liberals' agenda has found its strongest voice at a number of conferences that have produced ringing manifestos for reform. For example, a 2004 meeting in Cairo organized by the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies brought together one hundred participants from fifteen Arab states. In such venues liberals can speak their minds fully. The meeting's final communiqué declared that Western initiatives "can be the basis for a partnership." While many Arab people "doubt the true intentions and seriousness of the international initiatives for reforms," they also "realize their governments reject reforms." The Kuwaiti columnist Ahmed al-Rubei told the conference, "Reform is not a vice, it is a virtue. Without reforms, this area will explode and will blow up the whole world with it."[4]

In contrast, though, the liberals' nationalist and Islamist rivals control armies of followers and usually shape events in the region. Even if the success of these competing movements can be attributed to repression or manipulative propaganda, they are nonetheless very powerful forces not easily defeated. Decades of thought and education are required to make a liberal, while a few already familiar, widely espoused slogans—accepted by many as legitimate and authentic—suffice to produce followers for their enemies. Such attitudes seem entrenched among the younger generation, more of whom appear to be committed to an extreme Islamist view of the world than were their elders. Even a university education produces more Islamists than liberals.

What makes this situation so hard to accept is the combination of Western expectations and hopes to the contrary among the most articulate, courageous voices in the Middle East.[5] Yet there is a big gap between believing liberal democracy to be a better system and feeling certain of its ultimate triumph.

The really engaging question, then, is why has it been so hard to gain popular support for reform and moderation? A common claim by Arab liberals is that the masses really—but secretly—do support them. "Our numbers are small," said the Egyptian liberal Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "not so much for lack of fellow citizens yearning for liberal governance, but out of fear of publicly expressing those yearnings."[6] Opinion polls only partly bear out this view, and the problem deterring support is far more than just fear alone but also the persuasiveness of competing ideologies and the material or spiritual rewards they can offer their adherents.

One of the apparently strongest liberal arguments is to get people to focus on the seemingly undeniable failure of Arab systems, regimes, and ideologies to solve problems or make progress. This point is well expressed by Rami Khouri, an Arab journalist and columnist who grew up in the United States, who noted that the list of issues confronted by Arabs today is identical to those faced by their grandparents a century ago and are now being passed on to still another generation. The list includes:

> The quality of our sovereignty; the nature of our governance systems; the well-being of our economies; the provision and protection of the Arab individual's basic human rights; our relations with Western powers; the balance between religiosity and secularism; the nature of Arab citizenship;

> the role and rights of women; coexistence or confrontation between Arabism and Zionism; the balance between the identity of the modern Arab state and older indigenous identities such as religion, tribalism, family, ethnicity, monarchy, and regionalism; the role of civil society in the face of state power; the individual and collective right to bear arms; and the role of the military and security services in society."[7]

Ibrahim put the onus for this inability to solve problems on the Arab regimes that retained power by mixing a doctrine of populism, national liberation, socialist economics, cultural authenticity, and repression. The possibility of democracy was postponed to a distant future when total victory could be attained on all other fronts. Over time, though, it became clear that this Arab nationalist system failed domestically and brought repeated warfare in the region. To make matters worse, the resulting desperate situation made people believe that only radical Islamist movements could provide a better alternative.[8]

Of course, it is easily forgotten how tiny and apparently weak at times have been the forces of progress, moderation, and reason during the past in every other corner of the world. Yet it is equally true that in the Arab world the reactionary forces maintaining the status quo are markedly powerful and persuasive. They have clear ideas and programs that may not work, but they have been sufficient to provide the bread and circuses needed to persuade and soothe the masses.

Consequently, while it might seem obvious to many in the West and to Arab liberals that the problems of Arab societies require a new type of solution, the existing system offers its own justifications for why little or nothing should be changed. First, it downplays or denies that these social, economic, and political problems exist. Second, it attributes them to external interference by imperialism and Zionism. The Arabs have not made mistakes, argue Arab nationalists; they have merely been defeated by evil forces. If real Arab unity and militancy were to come into being, all the ruling mechanisms and ideas would work very well. To give up on these ideas and goals would be nothing less than surrender, inducing a state of permanent slavery.

The Islamist view is merely a variation on this theme. The cause of failure, it argues, is external interference and the mistake of not adopting Islam as the main ideology and organizing principle for government and society. If only this were to be done, the foreigner would be quickly defeated and all internal problems solved.

Those opposed to reform also effectively use many of the tools that at other times and places were wielded by reformers. For example, nationalism and religion have often served the cause of progressive change elsewhere, but in the Middle East they have been monopolized by the armies of the status quo. Similarly, prodemocratic forces in the West invented the idea of mobilizing the masses, a strategy now used most effectively by Arab nationalists and Islamists. Religious revivals and sects identified with grassroots or ethnic groups in other regions have often advocated freedom against autocratic regimes, a tactic now most often wielded by extremists in the Arab world.

In the Middle East, generally, the antidemocratic side has shaped the ideals of nationalism and religious devotion to its own purposes. Nationalism is identified with radical Arab nationalists, while national liberation from Western imperialism has been that group's calling card. These weapons are pointed not, as in other places, at a reactionary monarchy or authoritarian dictatorship but are used by those very systems against the democratic West and Israel. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Usama bin Laden took this rhetoric, put it into a modern Islamist framework, and proclaimed their movements as the Muslims' national liberation struggle. In this context, the liberals are portrayed as reactionary traitors who want to hold their countries back and enslave them to imperialists.

Both the nationalist and Islamist schools of thought have far more followers and a much deeper influence on the Arab world than do their liberal competitors, who often seem a virtual footnote in the ongoing Middle East discourse. Still, whether the liberal impulse in the Arab world is the wave of the future or a fragile endangered species, many aspects of this worldview reveal a great deal about the contemporary Middle East. And if liberalism is going to be the Middle East's wave of the future, it is all the more important to understand the thinkers and ideas shaping its infancy, the barriers to their progress, and the issues at stake.

While the roots of failure for liberalism and the interlinked stagnation of the Arab world have by no means been based on inevitable or immutable processes, they are the product of a clear historical progression.

Within living memory, from the 1920s and until the 1950s, the Arab world's future seemed open. The main challenge it faced was how to become independent, successful, and strong. In debates over the best solution, the liberal democratic perspective seemed to have an advantage. This was, after all, the route taken by the West, and many Arab intellectuals of the day would have agreed with the dictum of their Turkish counterpart, Kemal Ataturk: "There is only one civilization, Western civilization."[9]

Although on the religious front the situation seemed grimmer for liberal ideas, it was by no means hopeless. Aside from the secularists, there were many others who wanted to revive the old liberal strain of Islam from the Middle Ages. Centuries earlier there had been great Muslim philosophers and scientists but—unlike in the West—the reactionaries had won the battle to direct society. There had been no Reformation or Renaissance in the Arab world and, perhaps as a result, no rise of the modern nation-state, no scientific revolution, and limited industrialization.

On the ideological front, the medieval moderates had been defeated by hard-line religious thinkers who demanded a conservative reading of Islam. In the eleventh century, Ibn Salah al-din al-Shahrouzi issued a fatwa banning the study of logic as a "heresy delivering man into Satan's bosom." The advocates of such ideas favored the narrowest possible reading of Muslim texts, as opposed to thinkers who tried to analyze them using the tools of comparison and logic. The former, victorious, school preached, in the words of the Egyptian liberal thinker Tarek Heggy, "a dogmatic adherence to the letter rather than the spirit of religion [which slammed] the doors shut in the face of rationality."[10] The rulers of the day preferred the conservative approach, which stamped down on dissent and defended the status quo against liberals who raised subversive questions.

Consequently, the gates of *ijtihad*—allowing qualified scholars to debate the reinterpretation of religious texts to fit new times and situations—were closed. Creative thinking or critical inquiry regarding the meaning of the Qur'an and later religious texts was forbidden. Only rulings already made and narrowly adhered to would be acceptable.

The greatest irony is that it was Europeans who heeded the rationalist Islamic scholars of the Middle Ages in their revival of classical Greek thought. Thus, these Muslim scholars helped pave the way for Europe's

great cultural and scientific progress while being forgotten by their own people. In the West, rationalists defeated dogmatists. The backward Middle Ages had given way to the Renaissance and the Reformation. Had the same side won in Europe as in the Middle East, Heggy noted, Europe today would be at a far lower stage of development and enlightenment.[11]

There was another chance for change beginning in the nineteenth century, however, as the political and social weakness of the Arab and Muslim worlds could no longer be hidden or ignored. European development was accelerating and, in the form of imperialism, gaining power over the Middle East. Many Arabs thought that this cultural, intellectual, and technological gap could be bridged only by copying some of the features that had made European superiority possible.

In 1799 Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt with his army and an entourage of scientists and philosophers, heirs of the French Revolution. He easily defeated the rulers at the Battle of the Pyramids. Modernity in all its multiple forms, from military organization and technology to scientific inquiry, had come to the unavoidable notice of the Egyptians.

When the Egyptian military officer Muhammad Ali seized power and founded a new dynasty there in 1805, it was taken for granted that he would seek to imitate the Western model as a matter of both survival and progress. If Egyptians were being challenged to transform their society and jettison old ideas, this was no more than was being demanded of their counterparts all over the world and in Europe as well. Moreover, the definition of modernity was still in flux. It was a work in progress, and Egyptians could participate in the great enterprise, getting in close to the ground floor, so to speak.

And so Muhammad Ali called on European technicians and thinkers to help bring his people the benefits of modern civilization. Egyptians were sent to Europe to study and bring back these ideas and innovations. A small but influential Egyptian Westernized elite set about the task of transformation. Other Arabs paid attention. If Egypt could imitate the West, so could they. Clothes and music, the study of languages and modes of thought—all were seen as part of a package whose benefits would far exceed their cost.

These Egyptian and other advocates of change were not traitors or lackeys of imperialism. On the contrary, if they had succeeded in modernizing their countries, there never would have been any Western

domination of the region. They rightly saw real progress—not loyalty to tradition—as the best way to maintain independence. Equally, they believed that a self-directed program of modernization, including borrowing a great deal from the West, would allow their people to remain Arabs and Muslims while enjoying the fruits of everything new and good in the world.

The kinds of things they were trying to do would arouse the utmost revulsion among Arab politicians, intellectuals, and even the masses in later years. But in retrospect one can also see how their more fortunate counterparts in places like Japan, Korea, India, and Turkey used the same strategies of borrowing, reform, and enlightened preservation of selected traditions to succeed.

What were the Western secrets that served so well people who accepted the liberal doctrine? Constitutions and parliaments, mass production and urbanization, encouragement for new inventions and a willingness to make social innovations, equality for women and of opportunity across ethnic and religious backgrounds, rationalism and pragmatism, and clothing that allowed more freedom of movement, hand in hand with the protection of individual liberties. All were interwoven.

The modernizers saw the key to success as mastering these skills and adapting these institutions to their own societies. Through many twists and turns of history, this concept would remain a guiding star in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, as well as in less-developed sections of Europe. The path was not smooth. Some fought passionately against change. There were wars and setbacks, humiliations and competing ideologies. Yet the fundamental idea remained that the basic mix of ingredients transforming Western Europe would work everywhere.

Did this approach fit the Arab world's needs? Was it doomed to failure? These are questions that cannot be definitively answered. Certainly, elsewhere in the world the road to modern liberal society underwent perils and setbacks from such elements as communism and fascism, religious reaction, dictatorship, and civil war.

In England, the pioneer in the transformation to modernity, the rise of democratic institutions was a six-hundred-year-long process; in France the development of stable, representative government, from the Revolution to the Third Republic, took almost a century, followed by several more bloody adjustments. Extremely serious crises developed in Germany, Italy, Spain, and other places in Europe where reactionary

forces made a last stand under fascism, which came close to destroying the world. In Russia the Bolshevik revolution brought a seventy-year-long detour. Even the United States required a civil war to consolidate its democracy, while Japan needed eighty years of effort, punctuated by a disastrous defeat in war and a foreign occupation, to finish the process.

Between the 1920s and early 1950s, the Arab world seemed to be doing reasonably well in this effort. The liberal age of Arab politics included not only a more open intellectual debate but also the adoption of Western institutions, including elections and parliaments. In 1919 the liberal nationalists of Egypt's Wafd party staged a bloodless revolution amid their massive popularity. Three years later they won a big election victory and declared Egypt a modern, independent nation-state. The next year they promulgated a liberal constitution.

During this period, a number of great Arab intellectuals advocated major reforms through writing and participation in public life, especially in Egypt. They studied in the West and absorbed many elements of its best ideas, which they sought to blend with their own traditions. The main message they promoted was that Egypt and other states could advance, through education and development, along the same basic route the West had followed. Within a few decades, they would then become democratic, industrialized states with a strong middle class, high living standards, and a culture blending their own traditions—both Arab and Mediterranean—with those of European societies.

One such thinker was Qassem Amin, born in 1863, who studied law in Cairo, then spent several years in Paris before returning home to become a judge. Amin was worried lest modern life undermine Islam, but unlike the later Islamists, his solution was to adapt the actual practice of religion as well as society to new conditions. In 1899 he published *The Emancipation of Women*, which suggested that the way to save Islam and Egypt was to make women into frontline warriors in the war against ignorance. Only by being given education and equality could women teach their families the moral strength and social virtues needed both to advance society and preserve tradition. He insisted that Islam had advocated this concept but had been distorted by ideas brought in by converts from other religions.

Another great Egyptian liberal intellectual was Taha Hussein, born in 1889. A prolific author, professor, reformer, and editor, in 1950 he was appointed minister of education. He advocated free schooling for everyone

and the use of reason. In his controversial book analyzing pre-Islamic poetry, he applied this method to the Qur'an. He suggested it was written by people, rather than God, by trying to show some verses had existed in earlier times. Warned to desist by clerics—a sign that there were boundaries logic would not be allowed to cross—he afterward avoided this topic.

Then there was Salama Moussa, born in 1887, who studied in Paris and London for many years, where he was influenced by democratic socialist thinking. Returning to Egypt, he was involved in many journalistic, political, and literary projects. One of his books, *Freedom of Thought*, published in 1927, was a history of courageous individuals who fought against dictators and ignorance. He founded the Egyptian Association of Scientific Culture and advocated Egypt's economic independence, using methods pioneered by the Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi.[12]

Among the last of this group of liberals would be Naguib Mahfouz. Born in Cairo in 1911, he became a civil servant and published his first novel in 1934. While continuing his government career until retiring in 1972, Mahfouz was a prolific writer. The appearance of the *Cairo Trilogy* in 1957, penned before Nasser took power, made him internationally famous. In 1988 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. But his books were considered blasphemous by the Islamists.

During the 1920s and 1930s, such thinkers and political figures—especially, but not exclusively, in Egypt—declared themselves rationalists, patriots of their own countries rather than pan-Arab nationalists, part of a Mediterranean people whose history was rooted in all those who had lived on that soil and not just the Arabs or Muslims among them. They dreamed of making Egypt a modern state along European lines while at the same time preserving its own traditions.[13] The view of one such man, Tawfiq al-Hakim, could well stand as a contemporary liberal credo: the highest priority was to understand past mistakes to avoid repeating them; the biggest task was to expose truth no matter who was offended or what established ideas were challenged.[14]

While liberal thought was flourishing, so were democratic norms. In many Arab countries during the liberal era, there were elections, political parties, a free press, and the other accoutrements of this type of government. True, democracy was subverted by British or French interference at times, dominated by the wealthy, challenged by extremist

demagogues, and lacking widespread popular participation. Yet this system still offered hope for becoming stronger and more successful in the future.

Moreover, none of these problems were unknown in a Europe where in some countries totalitarian ideologies were riding high. Indeed, Egypt was an electoral democracy at a time when Spain, Germany, and Italy were ruled by fascism and the Soviet Union by communism, murderous systems that stopped at no crime. Nobody talked about Islam or the character of Arab society as preventing the rise of democracy in those days. The problems were considered to be poverty and lack of education, shortcomings that time and development would inevitably remedy.

Still, the fact remains that by the mid-twentieth century, ideas of democracy, representative government, free enterprise, and civil liberties—the entire package—would be as discredited in the Arab world as any political philosophy could be. A complex worldview and system had to compete against extremists wielding slogans offering fast, total solutions and who were ready to use violence. The idea of taking responsibility for the ills of one's own society lost out to the ease of blaming everything on evil foreigners. A moderate approach based on persuasion went up against militant doctrines quick to resort to violence and suppression of anyone who disagreed, labeling them as spies, traitors, and infidels.

Everywhere in Arab lands by the 1950s democracy became associated in people's minds with failure, corruption, and national weakness. But instead of turning to a more faithful manifestation of democracy—as had happened in Europe and North America—liberalism, pluralism, democracy, and free enterprise were rejected altogether.

Arab nationalism became the dominant ideology, and populist dictatorship was extolled as the way to achieve unity and progress. Ideologues and military officers were influenced by communism and fascism to various degrees. They also looked to nineteenth-century Prussian and Italian nationalisms that had succeeded in assembling a single country out of smaller, weaker states.

But theirs was a selective adaptation of Western nationalism that had usually replaced conservative monarchies with a liberal system. In the

Middle East, however, nationalism was a weapon used against liberal-oriented systems, a philosophy more akin to the radical transformations intended by Marxism or fascism. Moreover, rather than espousing loyalty to a particular nation-state with its own identity and interests, these nationalists were pan-Arabs seeking to coerce or subvert their neighbors into unification. As for democracy, prosperity, and social modernization, these were postponed to the far-off day when all Arabs were united and had triumphed over their foes.

Instead, too, the regimes and dominant ideologies borrowed the most illiberal ideas from the West. Many of the institutions identified with modernity were largely introduced to the Arab world, and especially to the common people, not through liberalism or democracy but through the interpretations of autocratic regimes and ideologies. Instead of free enterprise capitalism there were statist economies. Rather than citizens being organized from below by independent groups, they were regimented from above by state-mandated mass organizations.

As in communist countries or other radical Third World regimes, democracy came to mean the mobilization of the people in support of a charismatic dictator, uniting against local reactionaries and foreign imperialists, and sacrificing all for the cause of national strength and development. Thus, an election in which 99 percent of the people voted for the ruler was presented as a victory for "real" democracy. The main slogan of the Baath party, which ruled Syria and Iraq, was "Unity, freedom, and socialism." Unity was the prime virtue, which meant conformity, a rejection of political pluralism, and ultimately the fusing of all Arab states into one. "Freedom" was defined as the ability of Arab states to act as they pleased without foreign interference. And "socialism" meant the regime's control over the economy, and to a large extent, over all social institutions.

Indeed, it is quite reasonable to see radical Arab nationalism and Islamism as the Arab world's equivalents to what communism and fascism were for the West: oppressive systems posing as agents of revolutionary change but in fact arising from a reactionary rejection of modern liberal democratic society. New ruling classes and their dependents were created, and their vested interests built a high dam to protect the status quo. They declared war against largely phantom enemies, mobilizing society for unnecessary battles that, when lost, created even more resentment and hatred. At the same time, they rejected as sub-

versive and evil the very ideas that—at least if properly filtered and adapted—were most needed to solve their societies' problems.

Defeat has always been a central part of such processes. Before their communist and fascist revolutions, both Russia and Germany had lost wars. The myriad defeats and humiliations at falling behind the West were central factors in the evolution of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Arab states were repeatedly defeated by Israel on the battlefield, starting in 1948.[15] And the greatest defeat of all had been the frustration with a society that seemed incapable of advancing and impossible to change by any other means. Once addicted to a worldview based on hatred, enemies, paranoia, and the certainty of one version of the truth, people turned to new radical ideologies as old ones failed. When Arab nationalism was found wanting, Marxism and Islamism offered to replace it; when internal revolutionary Islamism was defeated, jihadist global Islamism claimed its place.

Beginning in the 1950s, Europe, Asia, and the Americas entered a phase of rapid advancement in the economic, scientific, and creative realms while the Arab world—except as a consumer of these products—played no role in this process. As one Arab writer explained, Arab leaders talked endlessly of battling foreigners and "liberating Palestine" but were only able to defeat their own people. The Arab world fell steadily further behind, rejecting innovations as threats and blaming their relative backwardness on Western, especially American, sabotage.[16]

At any rate, in the 1950s, anger at their own governments, humiliation by the West, defeat in Palestine, frustration at the slow pace of development, utopian dreams, and the belief that they had all the answers created a generation of pan-Arab nationalists. Their battle cries were that liberalism was a form of traitorous servility to the West and multiparty electoral democracy was a guarantee of backwardness. Such things blocked the Arabs from making the great leap needed to achieve rapid development and a renaissance of Arab power.

At the time, most Arabs thought themselves to be living amidst a bright dawn of freedom, unity, and socialism. In retrospect, it was a dismal period of endless squabbles and wasted opportunities. Yet in the twenty-first century such thinking still dominates the scene, and all indications are that it will not soon be displaced, either in words or in power.

Some called themselves Nasserists, others Baathists, and there were a range of other varieties. The need of the hour, they declared, was for a

charismatic dictator, a militant doctrine, and total unity in order to mobilize the nation for struggle. They all had the same basic plan: a revolution, which usually took the form of a military coup, would produce a strong, disciplined state (modeled on the army), a nationalized economy (based on that of the Soviet Union), and the merging of all the little Arab countries into one big powerful empire that could restore their people to greatness, destroy all enemies, and march forward to utopia.

Arab nationalists seized power in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq in the 1950s, while challenging the regimes in every other country. Equally important, they dominated intellectual life, the media, and the entire Arab discourse. These revolutions and ideologies resembled more those of communism and fascism in Europe than of democratic life there. In short, the worst Western ideas were imported and had a regressive effect: they created even more barriers to social, economic, and political progress.

The remaining regimes were still traditional monarchies, but they had to be somewhat apologetic for not acting like their more revolutionary counterparts. To avoid being labeled primitive lackeys of the West, traditional regimes had to spend much of their time appeasing powerful radical neighbors and proving they were part of the community of right-thinking Arabs.

Just as the gates of religious *ijtihad* had been closed in the eleventh century, those of political *ijtihad* were sealed in the 1950s. And by the 1980s even *ijtihad* on intellectual and social matters was stopped by the Islamists. Other than the right to chant a set of permissible slogans, there was little freedom of thought or speech. As the system faltered, the sphere of liberty contracted further. By the late twentieth century, it was almost impossible to find support for the concepts of Islam's bolder thinkers from a millennium earlier or for what Arab liberals had said a half-century before.

The regimes' battle against the West and Israel, as well as the struggle for unity and mobilization, provided good excuses for silencing dissent. The only remaining debate was among different shades of radical Arab nationalism, with a growing variation of radical Islamism. Arab liberalism's fate seemed settled: the West was the enemy, its influence subversive, its institutions unsuited for the Arab world, and its local sympathizers or would-be imitators were traitors.

During the long interim between the collapse of the old liberalism in the 1950s and the almost half-century required just to start its revival, most of the remaining Arab liberals were either actual or internal exiles. They either kept quiet or emigrated, spiritually or physically, to the West. Their influence on society was even further reduced. Mahfouz was a rare exception, but he remained self-consciously apolitical, though even in his case, the works that made him famous were written before Nasser took power in Egypt.

Abd al-Rahman Badawi was an example of the few remaining, and aging, holdouts. Born in 1917 into a wealthy village family in Egypt, he studied at a European-type school, became multilingual, and earned a doctorate at Cairo University writing on French existentialism. He also produced books on Friedrich Nietzsche and the heritage of the Greeks. But following Nasser's 1952 revolution in Egypt, Badawi spent almost all his time in Paris and rarely mixed with other Arabs. In 1954 he produced a volume of readings from independent-minded and secular-oriented Arabs in the Middle Ages titled *Atheism and Islam.* The book was quickly suppressed and forgotten. When he left Egypt again in 1967 to return to the Sorbonne, he described this move as escaping "the big jail."[17]

When Badawi did venture back to the Arab world, he was reminded of why he felt that way. In April 1973 Libyan dictator Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi visited the university in Benghazi where Badawi was teaching. When some of Badawi's students told Qadhafi they wanted more rights and freedom, the angry dictator had the professor arrested. But Badawi's friends in Paris and one of his devoted readers, the Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat, urged that he be let go. After seventeen days, Badawi was released from prison and returned to Paris for good.

Badawi viewed much of the Arab problem as starting with Islam, or at least with the interpretation of it that had prevailed. As long as Arab civilization was based on the concept of God's sovereignty and man's submission, he believed, there could be no relying on logic or human creativity. Badawi rightly expected that there would be no progressive change in his lifetime.

The generation following Badawi's largely rejected liberalism. From the 1950s on, Arab intellectuals, journalists, and teachers devoted themselves instead to pan-Arab nationalism or Marxism. They struggled to uphold the line of dictatorial regimes or revolutionary movements

whose enemy was a West based on liberal thought. Advocating liberalism required a reckless, even suicidal, courage. And when a few brave souls revived the old ideas after radical Arab nationalism's bankruptcy should have been apparent to all—written as it was in the Arabs' myriad defeats and failures of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—their fate did not inspire the fainthearted to follow in their path. Islamism, not liberalism, filled the vacuum.

Consider the story of one not so intimidated. Farag Fouda was born in an Egyptian village in 1945. He studied agriculture and received his degree from Ayn Shams University in June 1967, that fateful moment of Egyptian defeat in a war that Nasser had provoked with Israel. Fouda earned a doctorate in agricultural economy in 1981. He founded a consulting firm, but his passions were reserved for politics and intellectual life.[18]

Fouda wanted to re-create the pre-Nasser liberal movement and thought the best means to do so was by using its old political vehicle, the Wafd party. But after joining that group in 1978, he saw, to his horror, the party's leadership ally with the Muslim Brotherhood for the 1984 elections. How could the liberals join forces with the militant Islamists—Fouda called them "thinkers of darkness"—the greatest threat to any effort toward modernization, civil liberties, and democracy in Egypt?

For its part, the Wafd, which had originally welcomed Fouda, now saw his opposition to its opportunistic policy as an unwelcome irritant. He resigned in 1984 and formed his own party, al-Mustaqbal (the future), but it was stillborn. Instead, Fouda poured his considerable energies into writing eight books, all critical of political Islam. Fouda's concern was understandable. The Islamists' numbers and their boldness were rising in Egypt, leading them to the 1981 assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat and continuing on a path toward a full-scale insurgency throughout the 1990s.[19]

Fouda's keen sense of how to puncture the Islamists' pretensions made them furious. In one article, he ridiculed a prominent Islamist's claim that the Americans had used demons to invent their highly advanced warplanes. Why, he asked, did genies act only against Arabs and help their enemies? By attributing American success to magic, Fouda sought to show, Islamists were refusing to confront the social and intellectual, as well as technological, changes that had brought Western superiority. By the same token, they were rejecting the very steps necessary to

achieve progress for Muslim people. Angry at Fouda's article, some Islamists charged he was a heretic, a crime punishable by death.[20]

But Fouda was not intimidated. In his writings he pointed to the ironies of Islamist claims easily shown to be contradictory or false. Why, he asked, should the Arab model for social and political success be the seventh-century rule of Islam's first four caliphs? After all, that was a time of incredible strife, three of those leaders were murdered as a result of conflicts, and the whole system fell apart within twenty-nine years. Why should anyone expect that such a problem-ridden arrangement offered answers to today's very different society? Again, Islamists were enraged, in no small part because they were so vulnerable to such simple arguments.

Long before the rise of Usama bin Laden, Fouda was warning of the dangers of radical Islamists spreading hate and justifying violence against other religions. As Egyptian Islamists attacked Christian citizens, Fouda condemned a professor of the prestigious al-Azhar mosque university, later that institution's president, for urging Muslims not to be friendly or cooperate with non-Muslims.[21]

To call Fouda fearless would be a pale understatement. His greatest moment may have come in January 1992 when he publicly debated Muhammad al-Ghazali and Maamoun Hodeibi, two important Muslim Brotherhood spokesmen, at the annual Cairo Book Fair. The audience was packed by his opponents' supporters, whose chanting prevented him from speaking. Fouda announced that if they believed he was right they should continue heckling him since they could not defeat his arguments. Only if they had faith in their own ideas should they be quiet and listen. His gambit worked, and the debate was able to continue.

But the Islamists won the debate by other means. Five months later, a fish seller belonging to a revolutionary Islamist group shot Fouda dead with an AK-47. He later confessed that a declaration by a group of al-Azhar scholars calling Fouda anti-Islamic convinced him that the murder was a religious duty.[22] Indeed, at his trial, some leading clerics from al-Azhar were brought in as defense witnesses to suggest that the killing was legal under Islamic law.[23] Al-Ghazali, who had been unable to defeat Fouda in debate, testified that the killing was the proper punishment for an apostate, at which point the defendant shouted, "Now I will die with a clear conscience!"[24] Two years later, in 1994, Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt's greatest literary figure and the first Arab to win the Nobel Prize

in Literature, barely escaped a similar fate when he was stabbed by a radical Islamist.

Yet while Islamists and Arab nationalist regimes silenced liberal critics by a variety of means, they could not prevent some debate during the 1990s. The reality of the crisis facing the Arab world could be ignored largely but not totally. During decades of nationalist rule, Arab regimes had failed at home and abroad. The Arabs had not united into a single country or indeed even cooperated very much. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was one more unmistakable sign of the fact that pan-Arab nationalism had increased tensions among states. In direct contradiction of Arab nationalist doctrine, Arab regimes had to turn to the West to save them from Saddam.

The same situation applied regarding the Arab inability to destroy Israel. As military defeats followed one after another in an unbroken chain, Arab states abandoned the fight while keeping up the militant rhetoric. Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, the Palestine Liberation Organization made the Oslo agreement in 1993, and Jordan accepted a full peace treaty thereafter. By the 1980s it was clear that the United States was becoming the sole superpower, while the USSR, the Arab nationalists' old ally—and to some extent their role model—was tottering into the dustbin of history.

As the list of the Arab nationalists' international humiliations and domestic failures grew longer, it should have been apparent that the Islamists offered no better alternative. Not a single regime had been overturned by them in the years since Iran's revolution. The bloodshed and antagonism they inspired actually pulled the Arab world backward as well as engendering even more bloodshed. The Islamists' alternative was merely to promise they would do battle, wielding Islam as a weapon superior to nationalism. Bin Laden's ideas were no departure from the basic concepts that had long dominated the region, which was why his analysis—whatever people thought of his tactics—was so widely accepted after September 11, 2001.

Finally, the masses were not completely under their rulers' spell. Perhaps they would be open to a different explanation for their problems and a different prescription for solving them? The Egyptian writer Hani Shukrallah scoffed that people understood that the truth was often the exact opposite of the regime's claims. "When an official pronounces

Egypt free of mad cow disease, Egyptians immediately start stocking their freezers with poultry."[25]

No one could deny that the Arab world was in bad shape. But the reasons for this situation were hotly contested. Against the liberals' demand for major reforms, the prevalent view remained the old Arab nationalist/Islamist excuse that the Arab world was a victim of outside forces. Continued stagnation was due to imperialism and Zionism, which subverted and oppressed the Arabs. If local regimes were to blame, it was only because they were the agents of these forces or did not fight bravely enough against them.

In contrast, the liberal view was more unfamiliar and complex, requiring a painful reexamination of cherished beliefs and sacred matters. It blamed the Arab world's sad state on internal forces and backward ideas that blocked progress. Without change, including democracy, the Arab world would not be able to join the modern world and enjoy its benefits.

But these arguments were made mostly by Arabs who had already immigrated to the West or were writing in English. The situation was grim, wrote the Arab American professor Fawaz Gerges, because "authoritarianism and patriarchy are highly consolidated on every level of society, from the public sphere to the dinner table. These shortcomings, not U.S. foreign policies, are largely responsible for the lack of Arab development and progress."[26] Rami Khouri, at the time editor of the *Jordan Times*, added that the main reason for the poor performance of Arab society was the unlimited power held by the state. This problem had long existed but up to now had "been camouflaged" by the decades of the Cold War, early state-building, the oil boom, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.[27]

Or, in the words of Hazem Saghiya, a journalist living in London, the Arabs were stuck in the past while the rest of the world was quickly advancing. No one spoke about solving economic problems, raising the level of education, freedom, the status of women, or the other real issues that had to be addressed. As a result, the Arabs had constantly missed opportunities. The priority was put on confrontation with Israel while postponing progress. To justify this stance, calls for reform and moderation

were portrayed as attempts "to plunder our treasures." As a result, he concludes, dictatorship, and not progress, was spreading. Only among Arabs did one-party states still thrive, while Russia, South Korea, Mexico, and Taiwan had embraced democracy. Even the Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega had accepted the results of free elections removing him from office, something unthinkable in any Arab state.[28]

Nevertheless, while the best, most courageous Arab intellectuals have complained about this dreadful situation, they are few in number and face determined opposition from regimes that continue to control the media and other institutions. Some of them left to the West out of frustration, though even there they remained minorities in the field of Middle Eastern studies, which often seemed largely devoted to rationalizing the dominant Arab viewpoint.[29] Such people as Fouad Ajami and Kenan Makiya, brilliant exiled scholars from, respectively, Lebanon and Iraq who lived in the United States, were vilified and even threatened by colleagues.

Thus, the 1990s did not change anything either. Liberal forces remained very weak, the Syrian and Palestinian leaderships rejected peace with Israel, and the Islamist movement tried switching from a domestic revolutionary to an international jihad strategy. September 11, 2001, heralded a new paradigm that threatened to plunge the region into another half-century of catastrophe, violence, and intolerant ideology.

"Where," asks the American diplomat Hume Horan, "are the politically engaged intellectuals who can help a young Arab make coherent, responsible sense of a troubling modern world? . . . The few that even try are threatened, jailed, forced into exile—or worse." Who, then, could young Arabs turn to for guidance in understanding the world other than Islamist, nationalist, or Marxist extremists?[30]

This sad state of affairs led the liberal Egyptian journalist Ridha Hilal in 2001 to write an obituary for the brief, faint hopes of real change: "The calls for democracy and economic prosperity disappeared in favor of the slogan: 'No voice should rise above the voice of battle.' " It felt as though "we are forever doomed to wallow in the mud of violence, dictatorship and poverty."[31] Within two years of writing these words, Hilal had disappeared in Cairo, presumably kidnapped and murdered by radical Islamists.

There was, however, a definite liberal revival as well, and there were reasons for prodemocratic forces to believe that something might change.

Had not the extremist doctrines' claims become so obviously false and their costs too excruciatingly high? Had not the emperors flaunted their nakedness to an unmistakable degree? Clearly, in the twenty-first century's opening years there was a revival of the argument that liberalism, democracy, reform, moderation, and good relations with the West were the real elements needed to solve the Arabs' problems and improve their lives.

Still, given these factors, the upsurge in liberal criticism was far less than one might have thought. Many in the West expected a new liberal age and magnified the significance of any changes, turning every promising green shoot into a forest of moderation. Under President George W. Bush, the entire U.S. foreign policy strategy came to revolve around promoting democracy in the Arab world, and in 2003 a war was fought with Iraq in large part over that goal. This happened because many American leaders reached the conclusion that the region's problems, which had become the world's problem due to international terrorism, could be managed only by challenging the ruling system of dictatorship and antidemocratic ideology.

Yet even if one believes the Arab liberals' eventual triumph to be inevitable, that process could take decades. The liberals' first task is to insist that their success is indeed possible. They have been especially sensitive to any hint that Arabs or Muslims are incapable of achieving democracy. They defended the idea that democracy is by no means an alien concept for the Arab world by citing the pre-1950s era when, in Heggy's words, "true democracy prevailed." Liberals were just starting to make progress when the experiment was throttled in its cradle.[32] Instead of viewing this history through the radical nationalist paradigm—a corrupt incompetent regime being overthrown by courageous patriots—liberals blame the extremists for wrecking a march toward modernization that would otherwise have been successful.

Heggy also rejects the notion that lower levels of education and living standards make democracy impossible. Didn't England become democratic under even worse conditions centuries ago? Aren't Egyptians capable of making intelligent choices? Didn't the highly educated and cultured Germans elect Adolf Hitler? Why should Arabs, then, be deprived of democracy, "the finest achievement of humanity?"[33]

But this was not the only possible interpretation of this history, even among liberals. The more skeptical Tunisian intellectual al-Afif al-Akhdar,

who himself lived in Paris, pointed out that even most well-educated, middle-class Arabs had opposed the liberals, who "were more representative of their Parisian teachers" than of their fellow citizens. And even most of the liberals recanted their beliefs by the 1950s to back the new Arab nationalist dictatorships or even become Islamists.[34]

Indeed, says Akhdar, the Arab world has retreated so far as to be less open than at almost any time in its history. "The best Arab poets and thinkers of the early centuries of Islam would not be able to exist in the present-day Arab world." They were too free-spirited and secular, or else they favored religious ideas that would be considered heretical. At the same time, aspects of democracy left behind by the British and French, such as freedom of the press, a multiparty system, or the right to strike have been abolished by the Arab nationalist regimes.[35]

Even taking for granted now that Arabs could establish democracies, it is going to be a long and difficult road to get there. Structural change is unlikely to come from above. Regimes may promise reform, especially after the U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 made democracy the region's catchword of the moment, but much of this talk is for show.

A humiliating example of this situation was what happened in Syria, nominally a radical republic, when power passed from Hafiz al-Assad to his son Bashar. What better symbol of the nature of dictatorship could there be? After a few months of vain hopes for reform, the new regime settled down into the pattern set by its predecessor. Discussion groups were closed down; journalists were warned not to go too far. As a sole exception, the regime permitted publication of the satirical magazine *Addomari* (The Lamplighter), by the cartoonist Ali Farzat. So hungry were Syrians for something to read that didn't follow the party line that the first issue sold out within hours.[36]

Farzat had already been involved in another small victory of that type. In 1988 an exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris had featured one of his cartoons showing a general doling out medals from a stewpot to a man in rags. Implicitly this criticized one of the Arab regimes' main ways of retaining power: by stirring up war and conflict as a substitute for material achievements. Officials of Iraq, then at the end of a long bloody war with Iran, accused Farzat of making fun of

their country, ironically confirming his observation by this act of recognizing it. The Iraqi government threatened to withdraw funding for the exhibit and, although the show was on free French soil, Farzat's cartoon was removed, an example of how the regimes' repression is so often accepted and even reinforced in the West. But the other cartoonists rebelled, adding their own names to the offending picture and threatening to remove their work. For once, Iraq backed off.[37]

Yet such victories were small, rare, and short-lived. When it comes to Arab regimes, a mild poking of fun is permitted at certain marginal phenomena far removed from the leader himself: rising prices, pay hikes for officials, low-level corruption. But that is about the limit. It took only a couple of months for the Syrian authorities to decide that even one free publication was too much. Cartoons in Farzat's magazine were censored as critical of the prime minister. The magazine's print run was cut, its distribution sabotaged, and several issues canceled. Sadiq al-Azm, who seemed to be Syria's sole officially sanctioned dissident (and who paid his dues by supporting the regime at key junctures), explained that the magazine's mere existence proved the old guard "realized that the country cannot be run in the same way anymore."[38] But wasn't Syria still being run in 99.9 percent the same way?

Perhaps only in Kuwait was there a real liberal movement by the early twenty-first century. Press censorship ended after the liberation from Iraq in 1991, and there were regular elections for parliament. Newspapers are now privately owned, and the State Security Court was abolished in 1994. There is an independent and reasonably fair judiciary. And if Islamists are even stronger, the more open system lets liberals and Islamists fight their battle with words in parliament and the press. As one Kuwaiti liberal notes, "This is much healthier than having no public debate in an atmosphere that might encourage terrorism."[39]

At the same time, though, one should not exaggerate the state of democracy even there. Since it is almost impossible for even longtime residents to get Kuwaiti citizenship, only about 10 percent of the country's population—all of them men—are allowed to vote. The cabinet, appointed by the emir, rarely includes more than one elected representative, while all the appointed (unelected) ministers also sit in parliament. The liberals succeeded in electing only sixteen members of the fifty-member parliament at the peak of their success in 1999 against a larger number of Islamists. Even this was temporary. In the 2003 elections, the

Islamists took twenty-one of fifty seats and the number of liberals fell to three seats, plus several supportive independents.[40]

There are two liberal groups in Kuwait. The National Democratic Movement (NDM) and the smaller Kuwait Democratic Forum. The NDM is led by Ahmad Bishara, a professor of chemical engineering at Kuwait University. Ironically, the party arose from the radical Arab nationalists who had demanded more secularism and opposed the ruling monarchy because they wanted to make Kuwait more like Iraq. After Kuwait's experience with Saddam Hussein, however, that was not a very attractive position, and so liberalism was born on this shaky foundation.[41]

The general rule about extreme liberal weakness prevailed throughout the Arab world, both politically and in the public debate. Even the merest acknowledgment of reality could come to seem as a miracle of freedom, a festival of truth-telling. Such was the impact of the Arab World Competitiveness and UN-sponsored Arab Human Development reports of 2002 and 2003.[42] They pointed out that Arab economic growth, despite its huge oil and gas income, was stagnating, lagging behind the rest of the world in education, technology, and freedom. Unless drastic action was taken, the gap would grow wider. And there were no signs of the kinds of reforms needed to meet the challenge.

Education systems were poor, illiteracy high, research limited, and access to the Internet rare. An astounding 51 percent of young people said they would like to live elsewhere. There was little real growth during the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s. The amount of cultivated land declined, as did productivity, jobs, savings, and non-oil exports. The states did nothing effective beyond maintaining their military might and working to ensure their continued monopoly on political and economic power.

The Arab Human Development Report of 2002, produced for the UN Development Program (UNDP) by a group of Arab intellectuals with strong establishment credentials, painted a devastating portrait of the situation. It warned that the lack of progress in the Arab world was due to such internal barriers as the lack of political freedom, the absence of civil liberties, and the low status of women. In almost every category—political rights, a free media, literacy education, Internet use, maternal mortality, or agricultural productivity—the Arab Middle East lagged behind every other region except sub-Saharan Africa. In many respects, things were getting worse, not better.[43]

Such failures were said by the reports to be the true cause of Arab discontent. Rima Khalaf, the UNDP assistant administrator, warned that unless these deficits were addressed, "the Arabs will not be able to make it."[44] So devastating was the picture that the Kuwaiti daily *al-Watan* described the report as saying, "the Arabs live in the dark ages."[45]

Yet who was actually going to convert this assessment into a political philosophy, a set of arguments, and a program for action? One of the most prominent people trying to do so was Shafiq Ghabra, a Kuwaiti political science professor who held degrees from Georgetown, Purdue, and the University of Texas. Ghabra served as his country's information attaché in Washington from 1998 to 2002 and then returned home to become president of the new American University of Kuwait.[46]

As with many other liberals, it was contact with the West—and especially the United States—that influenced Ghabra's thinking. When as an eighteen-year-old student he came to study in Lincoln, Illinois, Ghabra was a radical leftist highly critical of the United States. Yet he was very impressed that people in that conservative Republican area were tolerant of his views even while disagreeing with them. Those he met, including the first Jews he had ever encountered, went out of their way to treat him well and judge him as a person and a student aside from his ethnic background and political stance. Thus, he learned the value of tolerance—which he described as not stereotyping people merely on the basis of their views—and the value of "dialogue and decency."[47]

The real "clash of civilizations," Ghabra explained, is not between Islam and the West but within Arab and Islamic civilization. Governments blocked change by "repression and the clever distribution of privilege," while the Islamist opposition had no solutions either. Who was going to do something about such massive problems as "exploding population, smothering poverty, vanishing water supply, collapsing social welfare systems, rigid governments?" Ghabra asserted that the vast majority of Arabs wanted neither a radical nationalist nor an Islamist solution. But the educated classes were too silent and passive, failing to take the lead in changing things because they lacked hope.[48]

It was easy to see why. Aside from the privileges to be gained by going along with the system were the penalties suffered for refusing to do so. Fouda was one case in point. Another Egyptian example is Nasr Abu Zaid, who, as a lecturer in Islamic Studies at Cairo University, wrote a

book published in 1990 that suggested the Qur'an be analyzed in terms of textual evidence and the context of its time.

Such questioning of what was officially regarded as God's timeless word, however, was a very dangerous thing to do. Islamists threatened Abu Zaid with death but then thought up a more innovative punishment. In 1995 they sued and had him officially branded as an apostate by Egypt's highest court. His marriage was ordered dissolved, since under Egyptian law a Muslim cannot be married to a non-Muslim. Abu Zaid and his wife, who supported his position and did not want a divorce, fled to Holland.

Also suffering serious harassment was the best-known Arab liberal of all, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, head of the Ibn Khaldun Center in Cairo and an internationally respected sociologist. Back in the 1960s, Ibrahim recalled, "We were idealistic. We thought we could change the world. Forty years later, some of us are naive, and a few of us still think we can change the world."[49] In his scholarly work, Ibrahim criticized undemocratic practices and discrimination against Christians. The Egyptian government accused him of treason, and a state security court sentenced him to seven years' imprisonment at hard labor. One charge against him was that he had accepted research grants from the European Union. Few Egyptian intellectuals openly defended him. Only after a couple of years of legal struggle did he succeed in regaining his freedom from jail.

Why was the situation so bad in terms of the prospects for democracy? Ghabra cited a number of reasons, in contrast to the usual claim that all Arab problems were due to Western and Israeli hostility. One was the fear of an Islamist takeover. Many who might otherwise advocate reform preferred to support their local dictator and to maintain the status quo lest too much freedom lead to having an even worse Islamist dictatorship. Equally, many feared there would be chaos if class, ethnic, religious, and other differences were played out in public. Then, too, was the dictators' own repression, propaganda, and intimidation. Finally, a failed Arab-Israeli peace process crushed hopes of a new era for the Arab world.[50]

Faced by terrible problems and denied moderate outlets, liberals argue, Arabs were pushed toward embracing extremist Islamist creeds. This was especially true because religion is, in Ghabra's words, the "only uncensored public expression in most Arab countries."[51] The Arab

regimes stopped radical Islamist movements that were using terror from seizing power at home, but since they changed none of the conditions creating the problem, the movement and its violence were merely exported. The result was September 11. Thus, the whole world has a stake in the victory of Arab moderates over extremists.

But Ghabra, always candid, admits the battle will be steeply uphill, with many advantages going to the extremist enemies. Unlike their opponents, who have no compunctions, the moderates are always ready to compromise and do not want to use violence. Similarly, the individualistic advocates of freedom and pluralism cannot easily compete with the extremists' disciplined organization and unity. They lack the militants' certainty and sense of righteousness, fanaticism, and single-mindedness, and also do not have an equivalent big base of popular and financial support. The prodemocratic forces consist mainly of small groups of intellectuals and professionals. Even if, as Ghabra claims, they are supported by "many members of the silent majority,"[52] the problem is that these people are so silent.

Despite the odds against them, however, there is no choice. The radical nationalists have led the Arabs into a quagmire; the Islamists would make things even worse. Nothing else has worked for the Arabs, and only reform and democracy remain as the way to save Arab society.

Ghabra, Ibrahim, Heggy, and others courageously took a path of difficult struggle with small forces against overwhelming odds. Yet there came to the fore an unexpected and most unlikely ally. For suddenly the most powerful country in the world embraced their vision. America's post–September 11 battle, President George W. Bush decreed, would be fought on two fronts: a war against terrorism and a battle for democracy. Beginning in 2002, Bush and his colleagues articulated a worldview that seemed scripted by the Arab liberals. For example, in a May 2003 graduation speech at the University of South Carolina, he articulated a virtual manifesto for reform and democracy in the Arab world as the highest priority for U.S. foreign policy.

Bush explained that the situation in the Arab world was intolerable: all Arab countries combined have less economic productivity than Spain and less access to the Internet than the people of sub-Saharan Africa.[53]

The effort to change all this, Bush said, was one to which massive U.S. resources and even the country's lifeblood should be devoted:

> In an age of global terror and weapons of mass destruction what happens in the Middle East greatly matters to America. The bitterness of that region can bring violence and suffering to our own cities. The advance of freedom and peace in the Middle East would drain this bitterness and increase our own security. . . . We will use our influence and idealism to replace old hatreds with new hopes across the Middle East. . . . We have reached a moment of tremendous promise, and the United States will seize this moment for the sake of peace.

The United States would do this, he continued, by supporting the advance of freedom in the Middle East out of both principle and national interest. Oppressive regimes have nurtured and protected terrorism, but in free nations "the appeal of extremism withers away" in the face of tolerance and enterprise. "Free governments," Bush explained, "do not build weapons of mass destruction for the purpose of mass terror."[54] Thus, democracy in the Middle East was necessary for America's well-being because it would end the threat against the United States. More liberty for Arabs means more security for the United States.

Not only did Bush insist that democracy in the Arab world was possible, he asserted that it was inevitable. People in the Muslim world also wanted freedom to improve their lives. As in many other countries, the dissidents and political prisoners of today would become the national leaders of tomorrow. By this means, as elsewhere, states that had once been enemies would become "loyal friends of the United States."

But Bush also had to strain himself to find "hopeful signs of change." He claimed that many Muslims already lived under democracy by including non-Arab societies like India, Turkey, and Indonesia, and he boasted about the holding of some not-so-free or -fair elections in Bahrain, Morocco, and Jordan.[55] By using simplistic analogies to such former dictatorships-turned-democracies as Germany and Japan, he ignored differences with the Arab situation such as the power of nationalism or religion to be mobilized against democracy there, the weakness of internal democratic forces, and the way that liberal ideas are discredited as tools of imperialist infidels.

Another major problem for a prodemocratic U.S. policy was how to deal with the regimes themselves. "America is working with govern-

ments and reformers throughout the Middle East," Bush explained. Yet this was a contradiction. He flattered Egypt as the Arab world's leading country that might be at the vanguard for reform and suggested the Saudi monarchy was moving toward greater openness. But the fact that the United States had to cooperate with regional governments on many other issues made it hard for Washington to press them on democracy and human rights. For example, the United States needed a good relationship with Pakistan for its effort in Afghanistan, despite the fact that this government was a dictatorship and a sponsor of terrorism and had helped radical Arab states obtain weapons of mass destruction.

The regimes would hardly help Bush subvert themselves. How could Bush simultaneously ensure that the regimes were not frightened or angered into wielding terrorism and anti-Americanism at the prospect of such U.S. prodemocratic subversion, and appeal over the rulers' heads to masses who had far more in common with them than with him? What would the United States actually do if the regimes ignored its demands? These contradictions could not easily be resolved. In Iraq the regimes would take their revenge and seek to sabotage his campaign, some by sponsoring anti-American violence, others by cheering it on.

In general, too, Middle Eastern public opinion polls did not agree with Bush's assessment. True, surveys showed a high regard for democracy as a system, but on the specifics of all outstanding issues they continued to show a strong support for the local status quo in practice. And even producing a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict—supposedly the magical solution to all such contradictions—would not alter at all the political realities of the Arab world. In fact, the regimes and radicals had worked hard to block peace precisely because it might undermine their power. This kind of situation had doomed Bush's predecessor's peace process and stymied his own attempts to encourage a more moderate Palestinian leadership.

Finally, there was the vital problem of an Islam dominated politically in this era by militant voices and interpretations. "When terrorists and tyrants resist and attack freedom," Bush said, "they are resisting and attacking the hopes of Muslims everywhere. When terrorists go on missions of suicide and murder, they defile the high ethical teachings of Islam itself."[56] But even if these steps truly deviate from Islam as generally practiced over the centuries, what if many or most Muslims do not think so? And how can this situation be altered? Despite the respect he

paid to Islam's moderate and humanitarian aspects, Bush was backing one interpretation against another in a battle within that religion. His opinion, or that of the West in general, will have little effect in that struggle nor will the side it prefers necessarily win.

The dictators' and extremist ideologies' effort to sabotage democracy, the inherent difficulty of building such a system, the radical interpretation of Islam's political role, and local people's doubts about reform's benefits have been blowing up Americans in post-Saddam Iraq. Whatever the United States says or does, most of the region's regimes, the Islamists, and the intelligentsia will tell their people that America is an enemy brutalizing Arabs, hostile to Islam, eager to steal oil and to turn Arabs into slaves of its empire.

For all these reasons, the task before the Arab liberals—and the United States, if it is going to help them—is a monumental one, consisting of many discrete problems, any one of which is daunting in and of itself:

- Building a mass movement out of a few dozen scattered intellectuals who face determined adversaries with millions of supporters
- Overcoming radical ideologies that have already convinced the Arab majority of their correctness and virtues
- Outcompeting a powerful, violent, well-financed Islamist opposition deeply rooted in the people's lives and capable of winning free elections
- Defeating the forces of repression belonging to governments willing to do anything to stay in power
- Outtalking a mainstream intelligentsia that benefits from its servility to the state and identifies itself as the bearer of the dominant antidemocratic ideology
- Transforming almost every government in the Arab world
- Avoiding a descent into anarchy if they ever do actually gain power
- Reconciling massively conflicting interests in terms of ideologies, factions, regions within countries, and ethnic groups
- Preventing other dictatorial regimes from subverting democracy in neighboring countries, as Iran and Syria do by encouraging insurgency and terrorism in post-Saddam Iraq

- Building new democratic structures despite a lack of experience in managing such a system
- Demonstrating they could deliver higher living standards, wealthier economies, stability, and other tasks hard to fulfill in developing societies even under the best conditions
- Doing all these things in far less time than was required to accomplish such achievements elsewhere in the world

That is not to say these tasks cannot be accomplished, but it will be truly remarkable if they are achieved. And, worst of all, as Heggy points out, the longer it takes to institute thoroughgoing change, the harder it will be.[57]