

Interview at Georgetown University
On Culture, Islamic Values, and Democracy in the Arab World
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1. How have the values and practices of Islam, such as the five pillars and the strong sense of an Islamic community in the Middle East affected its political development?

These are important questions and must be engaged very seriously.

First, we must distinguish between Islam and political Islam: Islam, the religion and its practices, and Islam as a political instrument used by elites of various sorts to mobilize constituencies. In other words, the “five pillars,” as part of Islam the religion, have as much impact on the political development of the Middle East today as much as the practices of the “First Communion” and “Baptism” have on the political development of the United States or Germany today.

Secondly, it is important for analysts/observers to move beyond theologocentric views of the Middle East, i.e., the views that attribute observable phenomena in the region to matters in religion and religious text. There are other more immediate influences on development in the region, such as colonialism, the “oil curse,” and artificial borders (that have been carved out by England and France early in the century), among others, that take precedence over the factor of “Islam,” which is not a monolithic factor to begin with, as various groups—Islamist or not—interpret Islam and political Islam differently.

While Islam does play a role in the Middle East, it must be recognized that it did not play a major political role in most Arab states in their early development during the post-independence period in the middle of the last century. At least two factors increased the role of political Islam in the region: 1) repressive Arab governments (often supported by the West) that prohibited established avenues for political participation (other than religion—which could not be “outlawed”), and radicalized the only remaining opposition (Islamist) by continued repression; 2) Western and U.S. support for movements and regimes of the right in the Middle East during the Cold War period. This support was intended to stem the tide of Communism and leftist regimes/movements, thereby leading to the support of conservative, Islamic oriented regimes like Saudi Arabia, that continued to funnel support and money to Islamic groups in the Arab world.

There are other factors, but the above factors cannot be discounted if we are to understand the rather sudden, and modern surge in the politicization of Islam in the region. In other words, political Islam is not a natural outgrowth of Muslim societies, otherwise, it would have emerged in the same force much earlier in the century. The politicization of Islam is in more than one way a reaction to the secularization of society

(as was the case earlier in Europe), the repression of authoritarian Arab governments (supported by their western patrons), and the continued threat leveled at Muslim societies and identity of late. Under different circumstances, Islamic parties can have the same kind of presence, popularity, and legitimacy that, for instance, the Christian Democratic Party enjoys in Germany.

2. What do you see, if at all, as the values and ideals of politics within the Middle East?

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Not fundamentally different from the values and ideals of people in Canada or Belgium: freedom, democracy, community, but simply colored by current events, conditions, and political configurations (the former colonies in the United States would not want “Democracy” imposed on them by their English masters. It does not mean they don’t want “Democracy”).

3. What do you see, if at all, as the west's role in the political development of the Middle East? Has the presence of the west's political culture and values helped the Middle East toward or away Democracy?

The role of the “West” must be divided across periods and (cluster of) countries. The Europeans influenced the Middle East directly through colonization before WWII and the United States was the primary influence henceforth. European colonization (largely by Britain and France) shattered whatever political, economic, and social unity in the Arab world by creating artificial borders and artificial nation-states early in the century. They proceeded to extract economic surplus from the region by exploiting its natural resources and co-opting and creating (new) leaderships that were compliant and largely alienated from the masses. This formula required the creation of a strong military, a more centralized non-democratic state, and a divided polity, all of which were carried out under colonial rule and left the emerging semi-independent states in the region with a very strong state and a weak, impoverished, and divided society. Authoritarian rule was an outgrowth of colonial realities that reinforced indigenous authoritarian practices at the expense of the opposite.

Let us consider the role of the United States in dealing with such outcomes. During the past half century, U.S.-Arab relations have been marked by periods in which successive U.S. governments oscillated between supporting forms of liberalization on the one hand and the autocratic status-quo on the other, both in the political and economic spheres. We can identify three distinct periods that mark ostensible, though not uniform, shifts in U.S. policy towards the Arab world: 1) The Cold War Period (1945 to 1990), 2) Post-Cold War Unipolarity and Neoliberalism (1991-2001), and 3) Post-September 11, 2001.

The shifts in U.S. foreign policy towards the Arab world were based on its changing priorities at the global, regional, and local levels. During the first period, Cold War politics guided U.S. support/opposition to the emerging post-colonial regimes in the

region, whether radical, liberal, or neo-traditional. This period is generally marked by U.S. support for movements/regimes of the right in the Arab world as a way to stem the growth and spread of leftist movements/regimes, with little regard for regime type (i.e., Democratic/Autocratic). In sum, the U.S. largely supporting conservative authoritarian regimes (traditional monarchies and republics alike).

During the second period, we begin to see active U.S. support for economic liberalization in the region, where emphasis was placed on opening, expanding, and, privatizing markets according to neo-liberal economic prescriptions that came to be known as the “Washington Consensus.” Once more, regime type was not a primary concern, so long as opening markets did not conflict with the authoritarian status-quo. The U.S. supported authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco (among others) so long as they adopted market reforms. Such support, with roots dating back to the 1970s in some cases (e.g., Egypt), did not bode well for the legitimacy of these already authoritarian regimes and put much wind in the sails of the Islamist opposition. The third and present period seems to herald a significant but hitherto unclear shift in the parameters of U.S. foreign policy, where regime change appears to be an ostensible goal of U.S. policy in the region. It remains to be seen, largely as a consequence of the situation in Iraq, what kind of regime or status quo the U.S. is likely to favor and whether it will be consistent in supporting democracy throughout the region or continues to support its authoritarian allies such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, among others.

This does not mean that authoritarian rule is simply imposed by the “West.” Far from it. Like authoritarian France and Britain and others in the West during the past centuries, the Middle East’s authoritarian regimes are largely home grown and molded by particular historical circumstances. The point is that the West’s and the U.S. involvement in the region since the turn of the century has been largely in favor of the authoritarian status quo, even after the end of the Cold war: the U.S. did not stop supporting the aforementioned authoritarian regimes after 1991, whereas it did support democratic movements in Eastern Europe and Latin America during the same period. The Oil factor, Israel, and the strategic location of the Middle East makes supporting democracy problematic for the U.S. foreign policy (given its current priorities): e.g., a democratic Saudi Arabia and Egypt will not as easily collaborate with the United States on economic (oil) or strategic (cosmetic peace with Israel) issues respectively.

4. Do you feel that the political values and the Islamic values that are present in the Middle East are conducive to Democracy? If yes, why? If not, why?

Democracy is not an outcome of values, though values are an integral part of democratic practice. It is rather a long historical *process* of *democratization* that progressively instills “democratic” values and practices, whether they were prevalent beforehand or not. “Democratic” beginnings have historically been more a product of social and institutional compromises in cases where no single force was overwhelmingly dominant/independent. We had a “democracy” in America thrive side by side with the institution of slavery for nearly 100 years, and along side non-institutionalized racism and other forms for

discrimination (alongside property and gender lines) since. With time, we came to define democracy in this country as something that cannot co-exist with slavery, but many still think of the U.S. as having a democratic polity even in the early days. Hence, the importance of thinking about “democratization” instead of a black and white conception of democracy or “no democracy.” The question of values, therefore, ought to be thought about and discussed in a more nuanced way if we don’t want to betray our own history.

For instance, how conducive were “American” or “Christian” values to democracy during such times when millions were literally enslaved? Consider the seemingly reasonable but essentially very problematic question: Does Christianity promote the enslavement and slaughter of some 70 million people (i.e., a conservative estimate of the native population and those who died in the slave trade)? This question is not fair for either “Americans” or “Christianity.” It is similarly not productive in its current form for either the “Arabs” or “Islam.” Their longing for Democracy should not be suspect, or a mystery.

Currently, the political value of freedom and democracy are strong in the Arab world, but the external factor and support for the authoritarian status quo continues to blur it. Clearly, oppressive, corrupt, and authoritarian regimes do well in crushing such values and practices. We only see authoritarian Arab governments and extremists on our television sets: we do not see ordinary Arab families and individuals who deplore both. If the Arabs did not want freedom and democracy (if they wanted authoritarianism), the current U.S. supported authoritarian governments would not have to oppress them. It might come as a big surprise to some that Arabs (communists and Islamists, democrats and human rights activists) do not enjoy being imprisoned and tortured by their authoritarian governments. It is either that or they are all sadomasochists.