

THE MOSQUE AND THE STATE: AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

Nader Hashemi

While the onset of the Arab Spring was widely celebrated in the West, as we approach the second anniversary of these democratic uprisings, optimism about the future of the Arab world has significantly waned.¹ A recent Pew Research Poll revealed that nearly 60 percent of Americans do not believe that recent changes in the Middle East will lead to lasting improvements for the people of the region and a majority of Americans (54 percent) believe that it is more important to have stability in the Arab World even if there is less democracy.²

Arguably, the recent popularity and rise of Islamist parties has affected Western perceptions about the Arab Spring, as have the ongoing war in Syria and the attacks on American consulates and embassies in Benghazi, Cairo, Tunis and Sana. Domestically, even the executive powers that were attained democratically have been used in favor of parties or individuals of Islamist orientation to broaden reach and influence, as it has happened in Egypt.³ Has the Arab Spring turned into an Arab Winter?

Daniel Byman of the Brookings Institution, for example, worries about the commitment and sincerity of the region's religious-based parties to respect pluralism and human rights when they assume power.⁴ Amitai Etzioni has gone a step further and suggested that the rise of the ultraconservative Salafist movement in Egypt's 2011 parliamentary elections (where they

obtained about 25 percent of the vote) might require the jettisoning of democracy in the Islamic world altogether.⁵ It is perhaps for these reasons that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has described the Arab Spring as an "Islamic, anti-western, anti-liberal, anti-Israeli, undemocratic wave."⁶

All of this recalls a famous statement by the late Jeane Kirkpatrick, American ambassador to the United Nations and Republican foreign policy advisor. "The Arab world," she said, "is the only part of the world where I've been shaken in my conviction that if you let the people decide, they will make fundamentally rational decisions."⁷ Previous election results in the West Bank and Gaza in 2006, where Hamas emerged triumphant, and in 1991 in Algeria, where the Islamic Salvation Front won a plurality of votes, come to mind lending credence to her comments.

How should Western policymakers, intellectuals, and the general reading public understand these developments? In this paper I offer an alternative to the conventional analysis of the relationship between Islam and democracy generally found in popular and intellectual debates in the West. I attempt to provide a critical analytical framework to examine the relationship between Islam and democracy historically, comparatively, and dispassionately.

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INTERPRETATIVE CAVEATS

There was far more to the post-9/11 debate on Islam and democracy than a simple concern about the scarcity of democratic political systems in the Middle East. Although predicting when a country might undergo a democratic transition is not an exact science, the presence of a key set of variables does make the possibility of a transition more likely.⁸ These are usually related to levels of socio-economic modernization (e.g., industrialization, literacy, mass communications), class structure (e.g., the existence of a sizeable middle class), and political culture (e.g.,

democracy-enhancing cultural norms, habits, and values). The more that these variables are in play, the greater the prospects for democracy. In the context of the post-9/11 debate on Islam and democracy, however, these issues have rarely been explored.

Instead, the mainstream media and intellectual arguments have come to represent a different set of concerns rooted in cultural and civilizational differences. The question: "Is Islam compatible with democracy?" by itself has become an all-encompassing catchphrase that expresses a widespread frustration with and condemnation of the general state of underdevelopment in the Muslim world. Commentators, pundits, and intellectuals have asked: "Why is there so much anger, instability, and social conservatism in Muslim-majority societies?" and "What explains the prevalence and popularity of religious fundamentalism, the unrelenting calls to violence, and the deplorable state of human rights, particularly women's rights?"

The level of anxiety about these questions rose to new heights after 9/11, as violence emanating from the Islamic world entered the heart of Western cities and was perceived as directly affecting the quality of life of millions of Americans and Europeans. Benny Morris, a widely respected Israeli historian, seemed to reflect a broad sentiment when he noted: "There is a deep problem in Islam. It's a world whose values are different. A world in which human life doesn't have the same value as it does in the West, in which freedom, democracy, openness and creativity are alien."⁹

In short, much of the post-9/11 mainstream media and intellectual debate in the West has often boiled down to this: Why is the Islamic world seemingly so *different* from societies in North America and Europe? Why are they not more like us?¹⁰ This basic point of departure, of assuming and expecting cultural and civilizational similarity, has formed the essential and enduring backdrop to an inquiry about the relationship between Islam, Muslims, and democracy. From the outset, this debate has been framed in ways prone to analytical distortion.

The essential problem with the question “Why are they (Muslims) not like us (westerners)?” is twofold. First, it mistakenly assumes that the West has always been democratic, peaceful, and liberal. No serious historian, however, would entertain such an argument for, as Mark Mazower pointed out in his *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century*, Europe is not the natural home of human rights and democracy. In fact, the twentieth century clearly demonstrates that the continent has been a terrifying laboratory of political violence and totalitarianism, a region seeking to invent and reinvent itself through war, revolution, and ideological extremism. Fascism and Communism—European inventions both—were anti-democratic systems that attracted millions of Europeans by offering different solutions to the challenges of modernity. By 1940, the prospects for democracy looked bleak and Europe’s future appeared to lie in Hitler’s hands. These sobering reminders should inform any serious inquiry related to international affairs today, particularly in relation to the study of non-Western societies, their histories, and their problems of political development.¹¹

Second, to expect Muslim societies to mirror the West in terms of social norms ignores the fact that the historical experiences of these societies have been qualitatively different from the Western experience both in the pre-modern and modern eras. Muslim societies are late developing societies that have had different experiences and have undergone a set of different political, economic, social, and intellectual transformations. The point here is that *where* one begins to investigate a social question and the broad assumptions that are brought into the initial inquiry can often predetermine the outcome.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY

Islam is not the first religious tradition to struggle with the relationship between religion and politics, nor will it be the last. The origins of political philosophy in the

West are rooted in the tension between religion and democracy. Socrates, it should be recalled, was brought to trial and sentenced to death by democratic Athens for corrupting the minds of the young *and* for the crime of religious impiety.¹² Furthermore, prior to the development of political secularism in the West, church and state were often deeply intertwined. Religion played an influential role in European political life well into the twentieth century, as seen in the frequent elections of Christian Democratic parties.¹³ Today in the United States, religion continues to play a similarly important role and, as the debate on Barack Obama’s Muslim heritage versus his Christian faith reminds us, one cannot be elected president unless he or she is openly and explicitly Christian (sometimes even this is not enough).¹⁴

Alfred Stepan, Director of Columbia University’s Center for the Study of Democracy, Toleration, and Religion, has argued that all emerging democracies face political conflict and struggle over the normative role of religion in politics. No democracy is immune to this dispute, and any objective reading of history will reveal that, for many long-standing Western democracies, this dispute was a major source of protracted conflict. Stepan, who is critical of an ahistorical approach to the study of democracy, has shown that virtually “no Western European democracy now has a rigid or hostile separation of church and state.” Instead, most Western countries “have arrived at a democratically negotiated freedom of religion from state interference and all of them allow religious groups freedom, not only of private worship, but to organize groups in civil society.” It is in the dynamic “twin tolerations”—whereby state institutions and religious authorities learn to respect certain minimum boundaries of freedom of action—that an understanding of the relationship between religion and democracy must be rooted.¹⁵

In thinking about the tension between Islam and democracy, the case of Catholicism and democracy is instructive. Just as it is with Islam today, until the 1960s, Catholicism was widely viewed as deeply anti-democratic and illiberal. For centuries the Vatican

opposed modernization and secularization, to wit: liberalism, democracy, socialism, capitalism, feminism, and the sexual revolution.¹⁶ This view was so pervasive that the distinguished American political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, in a widely cited and influential 1959 article on the prerequisites of democracy, could observe without controversy or debate that the “linkage between democratic instability and Catholicism may also be accounted for by elements inherent in Catholicism.”¹⁷

The relationship between Catholicism and modernity gradually changed following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), which addressed and updated Catholic doctrine and allowed the faith to openly support democracy and human rights struggles.¹⁸ Soon afterward, “roughly three-quarters of the countries that transitioned to democracy between 1974 and 1989 were predominately Catholic countries.”¹⁹ The long conflict between Catholicism and modernity is a sobering reminder that Muslims are not unique when it comes to this topic. An examination of other world religions (e.g., Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Confucianism) and democracy is very instructive in this context.²⁰

THE CRISIS OF SECULARISM: RETHINKING RELIGION-STATE RELATIONS

In 2007, Gallup published the most comprehensive survey of global Muslim opinion. Based on six years of polling in thirty-five countries that represented more than 90 percent of the world’s Muslim population, it found a widespread compatibility of values between Western and Muslim societies in terms of support for human rights, basic freedoms, democracy, and gender equality. They differed, however, in their attitudes on the relationship between religion and politics. Muslims do not believe that greater democracy and self-determination require a Western-like separation of church and state. “Poll data show that large majorities of respondents in the countries surveyed cite the equal importance of Islam and democracy as essential

to the quality of their lives and the future progress of the Muslim world.”²¹ How can this difference be explained? Again, we turn to history.

The history of religion-state relations and the role of religion in Muslim societies, both in the pre-modern and modern periods, have been qualitatively different from that of the West. Thus both sides have different historical memories and have learned different political lessons. Part of the problem here is the assumption that because the West finally managed to negotiate a broad democratic and secular consensus on the normative role of religion in government after centuries of conflict, bloodshed, and experimentation, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, then the rest of world must have done so as well.

Looking back on the history of the Arab-Islamic world, however, one is struck by the absence of major religious wars comparable to the European experience. In addition, there have been none of the intense battles over religious toleration that forcibly generated new moral, political, and philosophical arguments on the relationship between religion and political authority. Classical and pre-modern Muslim societies were more tolerant of religious pluralism than their Christian counterparts during, for example, Europe’s Dark Ages and right up until the modern period.

Moreover, the classic constitution of the historic Islamic state perceived religion as limiting political tyranny, rather than acting as a source of conflict and deep division. As Noah Feldman observes in his study *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State*, “the [religious] scholars...built themselves into a powerful and effective check on the ruler.”²² At various times, these scholars could restrain the rulers’ autocratic ambitions by forcing them to recognize certain limits demarcated by Islamic law in exchange for conferring political legitimacy.²³

Given these different historical experiences, religion-state relations in the Muslim world have bequeathed different historical lessons. Today, significant segments of the Muslim population view religion not as a natural ally of despotism and a cause of social conflict, but as a

possible agent of stability and predictability as well as an ethical constraint on political power. This partly explains why demands for religion's greater role in politics continue to find a sympathetic hearing in parts of the Arab-Islamic world—although notably not where Islamists are already in power.

Furthermore, many Arab societies have been deeply shaped by the negative experiences of post-colonial authoritarianism and the forms of secularism associated with these regimes. The various post-Second World War modernization projects and political systems were often

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justified in the name of secular Arab nationalism. Yet by the late twentieth century, most Arab regimes were as politically repressive as they were economically corrupt. Ben Ali's Tunisia, Mubarak's Egypt, Saleh's Yemen, and Gaddafi's Libya embodied this sorry state of affairs. In Syria, for example, the ruling regime today justifies its rule, in part, in the name of secularism.²⁴ It responded to the (at least initially) overwhelmingly non-violent pro-democracy protests with such extreme brutality that Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the UN Human Rights Council have characterized the regime's behavior as "crimes against humanity."²⁵

For a generation of Arabs, "secularism" is associated with dictatorship, repression, and nepotism. The turn to Islam as an alternative source of political inspiration and hope, therefore, was both logical and natural. At the moment, reliable polling suggests that most Arabs oppose the idea that democracy demands a western-style form of secularism and that large majorities support the idea

that Islamic law should be "a" source (not "the" source) of legislation.²⁶

THE ARAB SPRING, DEMOCRACY, AND THE QUESTION OF FUNDAMENTALISM

The 2011 Arab revolutions are best described as uprisings for democracy and dignity.²⁷ They are democratic in the sense that they are driven by a deep-rooted hunger for political empowerment on a mass level, specifically the replacement of elite rule with popular sovereignty. They are also about dignity in that the protesters are rejecting the humiliation and degradation that has accompanied decades of authoritarian rule, with its massive corruption, nepotism, absence of the rule of law and political transparency, and rampant abuse of power. The increasingly educated, globalized, and young segments of Arab society—the driving force behind these uprisings—are particularly motivated by the shame of their political and economic systems coupled with a demand to be respected by political leadership; a respect that can only be generated by democratic rule.²⁸

While these uprisings have been widely celebrated around the world, the West has also viewed them with considerable anxiety and foreboding. Do they represent another 1989 Berlin Wall moment, a prelude to a broader regional democratic transition, or a replay of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which had democratic potential yet resulted in an authoritarian Islamist regime in the heart of the Muslim world?

Much of the concern about the Arab Spring's future trajectory has focused on Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and, to a lesser extent, on Tunisia's Ennahda, a sister Islamist movement. In *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, historian Niall Ferguson argues that the "core values of Western civilization are directly threatened by the brand of Islam espoused by...the Muslim Brotherhood leaders," whom he believes are collectively Islamo-fascists who seek "the restoration of the Caliphate."²⁹ But questions remain: What role have these groups played in the

uprisings? How much of their popular support is genuine and what are the political consequences for regional stability, international security, and democracy if they should ultimately emerge triumphant? While these are legitimate questions, the mainstream intellectual and policy debate in the West have ignored some basic questions about the political development of the Arab-Islamic world that deserve critical scrutiny.

POLITICAL ISLAM AND THE WEST

A central trope of the criticism against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for example, runs as follows: It is a deeply illiberal organization whose commitment to pluralist democracy is as shaky as its commitment to women's and minority rights. In recent weeks, President Morsi's edict which grants him immunity from all legal challenges or intervention from the judiciary extends plausibility to this criticism.³⁰ The centrality of *shariah* to its political platform is often cited as evidence of the same. More recently, one can point to its 2007 draft political platform, which called for an Iranian-style religious advisory council to ensure that all proposed legislation conform with Islamic law. In the same vein, the platform (which has since been revised) stated that neither Copts nor women could serve as president or prime minister.³¹

While there is much to be concerned about with respect to the future role of Islamist parties in the Arab world, mainstream Islamist parties are viewed by the West with deep suspicion *not* because of their distance from liberal values, but because of the challenge they pose to long-standing Western geopolitical interests in the Middle East, primarily Israel and the pro-Western (and deeply undemocratic) regimes in the Arabian Peninsula. It is plausible that, hypothetically speaking, if the Muslim Brotherhood were to announce tomorrow its full recognition of Israel and accept the legitimacy of the ruling regimes in the Persian Gulf, and devote itself to da'wah (missionary proselytizing) and social welfare work instead of parliamentary politics, the fear and foreboding

associated with it would likely drop precipitously in western policy and intellectual circles.

In this context, the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi has noted that there is a long and sordid history of Western liberal democracies supporting and promoting backward and fanatical forms of Islamic fundamentalism in order to advance their interests in oil production and arms sales in the Middle East.³² While her analysis focused on Saudi Arabia and Wahhabi Islam, her argument can be extended to many of the pro-Western Gulf regimes, whose record on democratic and liberal values is arguably far worse than that of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia's Ennahda Party. The Western response, or lack thereof, to the crackdown on Bahrain's 2011 pro-democracy protests is an illustration of her thesis. Support for longstanding dictators and *shariah* ordinances are perfectly acceptable in this context. From the West's perspective, there are "good" and "bad" forms of Islamic fundamentalism. Those fundamentalist groups and illiberal regimes that line up with and enhance Western geostrategic goals are to be tolerated, supported, and

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sustained (e.g., the Afghan Mujahideen and Pakistan's Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s); those that are politically independent and operate outside Washington's foreign policy framework are to be opposed and held to a different ethical standard (e.g., Hamas and Hezbollah). In this moral and political calculus, liberal democratic values are of little relevance.

The second point concerns the nexus between authoritarian Arab regimes, the Western support that bolsters them, and the political ramifications of this

support for democracy's future. Stated simply, Western support for authoritarian regimes has had tremendously negative political consequences for the region's prospects for democracy. Decades of political repression, particularly the boot on the neck of secular civil society, has forced political opposition toward more traditional sectors of society, such as the mosque. The forces of religion have indirectly and inadvertently benefited from the post-colonial Arab states' authoritarian policies, in part because all rival secular political organizations were suffocated or crushed. The 2011 electoral results in Egypt and Tunisia, where Islamist parties emerged victorious, confirm this point.

In the same way that political Islam emerged from decades of authoritarianism as the only credible and organized opposition in Iran, a similar (though not identical) situation prevails in much of the Arab world today. The social conditions in the decades before the 1979 Iranian revolution, which were a specific and direct by-product of the authoritarian policies of the Western-backed Pahlavi monarchy, created fertile ground for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. These authoritarian policies undermined the forces of democratic secularism and liberalism, and thereby inadvertently strengthened the forces of political Islam in the lead-up to the 1979 Iranian revolution. To simply decry this state of affairs in an ahistorical vacuum is to ignore the political consequences of supporting repressive authoritarian regimes. Ultimately, one cannot support the social conditions that give rise to Islamic fundamentalism and then expect secular liberal democrats to emerge after the revolution. Thus, the strength and popularity of religious movements makes perfect sociological sense, *in large part* due to the West's long-standing support for Middle Eastern dictatorships.³³

CONCLUSION

An understanding of history is essential to understanding the tensions between Islam and democracy, given that the development of democracy and human rights is a

gradual historical process. Most emerging democracies have to grapple with the place of religion in government. There are no blueprints to follow. Democratic bargaining and negotiation over the normative role of religion in politics is an inevitable part of the history and consolidation of democracy in all societies. Contrary to popular perceptions, no religion is born with an inherent predisposition toward democracy, liberalism, or secularism. Like other religious traditions that originated in the pre-modern era and are scripturally based, Islam is neither more nor less compatible with modernity than are Christianity and/or Judaism. Recall again that not too long ago it was widely assumed that Catholicism was an obstacle to democracy and that only Protestant-majority countries could respect popular sovereignty. Very few people would seriously entertain this argument today. This is not to suggest that religious doctrine should be completely ignored when discussing democracy in the Middle East, but rather that the interpretation of religion is always contextual and evolving; at best, it is only one factor among many that affect the prospects for democratization and liberalization.³⁴

In the context of the contemporary Islamic world, the struggle for democracy has been negatively affected by ongoing intervention from outside powers. Long-standing policies, particularly those of the United States, of supporting authoritarian dictators such as the Shah of Iran, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and the House of Saud have impeded political development. Coupled with the destabilizing effects of the Israel-Palestine conflict, an environment that is more conducive to the growth of radical religious politics than secular democratic politics has flourished. In this sense, the Middle Eastern and European experiences have been qualitatively different. External intervention in support of authoritarian regimes was not a factor in the historical development of democracy in the West; in the modern Middle East, however, it has been a critical factor.

Political sociologist Asef Bayat has offered the following advice to those who are serious about engaging with and

understanding the problems of political development in the Arab-Islamic world today:

Congruence between Islam and democracy is not simply a philosophical issue, as it is widely assumed, but a political one. It is a matter of struggle. The pertinent question is not whether Islam and democracy are compatible (least of all because of the contested meanings attached to both Islam and democracy), but rather how and under what conditions Muslims can make their religion compatible with desired notions of democracy; how they can legitimize and popularize an inclusive reading of their doctrine in the same way that democrats [in the West] have been struggling to broaden narrow (white, male, propertied and merely liberal) notions of democracy.³⁵

Bayat suggests that future debate on the topic of Islam and democracy should be less abstract and more rooted in case studies and solid empirical analyses of those social conditions that can promote democracy in societies where religion is a key marker of identity. Yes,

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religious doctrine and theology are important, but equally important are the domestic, regional, and international economic and political contexts that shape the contours of religious interpretation, social debates, and political struggles in Muslim societies.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2011–2012 Arab Spring is best understood not as a single event, but as an ongoing process of democratization. While the old authoritarian order is slowly crumbling and a new era is gradually emerging, it will take considerable time for democratic transitions to unfold in the majority of Arab countries, and even longer before these democracies become consolidated. The following policy recommendations can strengthen and enhance the political transformations currently underway.

VOCALIZE SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

While the struggle for human rights and democracy is an internal process that Arabs and Muslim have to lead, support for these ideals from the international community is vital. The people of the Middle East and North Africa will no longer tolerate the persistence of political tyrannies, one-party states, and family-based dictatorships in their midst. In all interactions with the governments of the region, bilateral relations between Western governments and those in the Arab-Islamic world should be premised on support for an agenda based on democracy and human rights. Western leaders should vocalize their support for these principles more frequently and *consistently*, including publicizing the names of political dissidents who have been jailed for their pro-democracy activism. This should be done across the region, regardless if they are allies or adversaries of the West.

1. Support Strong Civil Societies and a Robust Public Sphere

A viable democracy depends on the existence of a strong civil society and an open public sphere. For decades the peoples of the Middle East have lived under authoritarian regimes that suffocated civil society and silenced the free exchange of ideas. The

best antidote to the rise and popularity of religious fundamentalism is to challenge its proponents' ideas in the public sphere and scrutinize their views in the court of public opinion. Western governments should invest heavily in Muslim civil societies and those NGOs working to promote an open public sphere in which the people can freely debate the norms and values upon which they want to build their society.

2. Democracy Requires Stability

Transitions to democracy require societal stability. Political upheavals, economic shocks, and the onset of war allow authoritarian forces, in the name of seeking political order, to gain in popularity. For far too long the Middle East has witnessed foreign occupations, economic underdevelopment, and an unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The persistence of these issues creates social conditions that do not enhance democracy, but rather social conditions that fuel Islamic fundamentalism and extremism. A war with Iran over its nuclear program, for example, would be catastrophic for the prospects for democracy in the Middle East. Western governments are encouraged to increase their diplomatic engagement to solve the Israel-Palestine conflict, to remain committed to a diplomatic resolution with Iran, and to increase economic aid to the region.

ENDNOTES

1 This paper draws upon three of my recent essays. Readers who are interested in a more detailed examination of the themes raised here are encouraged to read the following: Nader Hashemi, "Islam and Democracy," in *Oxford Handbook on Islam and Politics*, ed. John Esposito and Emad Shahin (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Nader Hashemi, "Islam and Democracy after 9/11," in *The Edinburgh Companion to the History of Democracy*, ed. Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); and Nader Hashemi, "The Arab Revolutions of 2011: Reflections on Religion and Politics," *Turkish Insight* 13 (April–June 2011): 15–21.

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- 20 Larry Diamond, Marc Plattner, and Philip Costopoulos, eds., *World Religions and Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Jeffrey Haynes ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2009), chapters 2–9.
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