

Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com

[See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)

[Order a reprint of this article now](#)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

HOUSES OF WORSHIP | MARCH 11, 2011

The New Mideast Will Still Mix Mosque and State

After Ben Ali and Mubarak, many Arabs and Muslims in the region identify secularism with tyranny.

By [NADER HASHEMI](#)

The uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East have been widely described as secular rebellions led by middle-class, tech-savvy young people seeking economic and political justice. Protests have generally called for democratic, not Islamic politics, and for the rule of law, not Shariah law. Islamists were late to join the crowds, and they have participated only as one group among many. Because of all this, most Westerners have embraced the revolts. We should not, however, assume that the protesters seek to build replicas of the societies that exist in the West.

That assumption is erroneous because the Arab world is only beginning to debate basic questions of civic and political life—especially what role religion should play in government.

Westerners should avoid the so-called problem of transference: the natural tendency to assume that our historical experience is universal. It is misguided to assume that because the West—after centuries of bloodshed and experimentation—arrived at a broad consensus around democracy and secularism, so has the rest of world. The historical experience of Arab and Muslim societies has been qualitatively different.

Westerners recoil from the thought of religion intersecting with government. Our backdrops are the Wars of Religion in the 16th and 17th centuries, abuses by the Catholic Church, and intense intellectual, political and social battles over religious toleration. By contrast, Muslim societies have been shaped by different experiences.

For them, religion was often not a source of conflict but a tool to limit political tyranny by forcing sultans and caliphs to recognize certain limits demarcated by religious texts and scholars, who had a virtual monopoly on legal affairs. Rulers, meanwhile, won political legitimacy by respecting religious authorities.

In some cases that meant bowing completely to those authorities: In May 1807, for example, the Ottoman Sultan Selim III was deposed after the chief mufti ruled that his modernization policies had violated Islamic principles.

Significant segments of the Muslim world today believe that religion is not the natural ally of despotism but a possible agent of stability, predictability and limited government. In many cases, modern Arab societies associate secularism with postcolonial authoritarian regimes that repressed their people in the name of secular Arab nationalism. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak's Egypt embodied this state of affairs. Thus for a generation of Arabs, secularism is linked to dictatorship,

corruption and nepotism.

As a result, the turn to Islam by many Arabs as an alternative source for political inspiration and hope was both logical and natural. At the moment, reliable polling suggests that most Muslims oppose the idea that democracy requires Western-style secularism. Large majorities also support the idea that Shariah law should be a source of legislation (among others).

Most Arabs and Muslims have never lived in an open society in which they could publicly contest political and social norms. As such, these societies have not yet had the opportunity to negotiate the demarcation of mosque and state democratically.

Arabs and Muslims may now have this opportunity for the first time in history. While the coming debates will be divisive and may sometimes shock the liberal conscience, the future political stability of North Africa and the Middle East—and the democratic aspirations of entire peoples—depends on this process taking place.

Mr. Hashemi, a professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver, is co-editor of "The People Reloaded: the Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future" (Melville House, 2011).

Copyright 2011 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com