MERIA

ARAB LIBERALISM AND DEMOCRACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A Panel Discussion

On August 13, 2004, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) held a forum on Arab Liberalism and Democracy in the Middle East. The following is an edited transcript of the event, as broadcast on C-Span. It is hoped this edited transcript will inspire additional thought, debate, and ideas on the subject.

Brief biographies of the participants can be found at the end of the article.

Barry Rubin: Our goal today is not a political discussion but an attempt to make an assessment. Making an assessment requires separating analysis from policy recommendations. We have had a real problem in the study of Arab liberalism because the evaluation of the material has sometimes been so tied in with what people want to recommend that the United States or the West do, as well as what they would like to see happen.

We have now had in recent years three major situations in the Middle East where people's goals and aspirations have gotten in the way of their assessment and have distorted that analysis. First of those was the Oslo Peace Process. People wanted peace, to believe it could be easily attained, and to achieve it. As a result, there was a significant overestimate of the Palestinian leadership's willingness to keep its commitments and desire to make peace.

Next, many people wanted to encourage rapprochement between the West and Islam, and so they hoped that terrorism would not prove to be a big problem. This resulted in a significant misestimate of the threat of Islamist terrorism internationally.

After that, there were many people who thought that overthrowing Saddam Hussein was an obviously good thing, but this gave us mistaken intelligence

information and an underestimate of how difficult it would be to establish a stable, democratic regime in Iraq.

Let us not make this mistake a fourth time by overestimating support for reformists in the Arab world and underestimating the difficulty they face because many people think Arab liberals are doing good and necessary things, as well as assuming that the Middle East is--or should be--a carbon copy of the West.

The kinds of problems I am talking about are illustrated by two articles published in late 2004 in two of the very top American newspapers. The first article claimed that Muslims are reassessing the more radical interpretations of Islam, which are very powerful now, and used as a specific example the argument that one would get several dozen black-eyed virgins if one committed a suicide bombing and went to heaven. But the entire article consisted of an account of a German scholar writing under a pseudonym saying that this claim is based on a linguistic misunderstanding. The researcher is not a Muslim, Arab, or Middle Easterner and his writing is not even appearing in Arabic or any publication in the region. Indeed, he so intimidated that he has to write under a pseudonym. So how does this prove that a reassessment is taking place? If one is, this article didn't show it.

The second article, by an American, asserted that Arab liberalism has become very strong and that the reformers wanted active U.S. help. The article, though passionate and assertive, provided only two quotes from actual Arabs. One was from a very fine gentleman who stays clear of politics; the other was by an individual from whom I can bring ten statements in print saying the exact opposite of what he supposedly believes here.

So we must start with and stick with the evidence--and the evidence shows that Arab liberals are weak. If you actually survey all the possible literature, it is clear that they still represent a small minority, not only on the political scene, not only in public opinion, but even in the columns of the newspapers open to running liberal articles. We have done content analysis of newspapers like *al-Sharq al-Awsat* which demonstrates this fact. The question to be answered is why Arab liberals are so weak and have to water down their arguments so much. And the answer here lies in large part with the mechanisms through which the Arab nationalist regimes, the intellectuals who carry that ideology and serve those regimes, and the Islamist opposition dominate Arab society and discourse.

On top of this is the fact that there is a lot more being written by Arab liberals who live outside the Middle East. Even Arab liberals who live inside the Middle East are doing much of their writing in English--both in Western publications and local English-language newspapers--and are going much further in their views when they do write in English as opposed to Arabic.

This is understandable. I want to make it very clear that I am sympathetic to their efforts and respect their courage. But their struggle becomes all the more impressive when one understands how incredible are the odds they face and their own side's pitifully few assets.

At this point, I must refer to a side issue that greatly distorts any discussion of this issue. The questions raised here revolve around issues like "Is democracy impossible for Muslims? Is it impossible for the Arab world?" These types of questions are nonsense. They are a waste of time.

If we look at the history of the world, every single society has gone through centuries of autocratic rule. It is very interesting to compare the Middle East to European history, going back several centuries. What we see is that the road of democracy is always very difficult and that it takes an incredibly long time. In England we are talking about centuries. The period between the French Revolution and the real institution of actual democracy in France was one hundred years. In Germany, to put it mildly, they had a few problems before they finally got it right. Russia took a 70-year detour through totalitarian Communism. And religious ideas, institutions, and hierarchies were persistent obstacles on the road to democracy in Europe.

So, what we see in the Middle East is not atypical in any basic way from Western history. No special factor involving Arabs or Islam is needed to explain the lack of democracy and social change in the Middle East.

What is, however, atypical about the region is that the year on the calendar page is 2004. Other places have already resolved the problems that plague the Middle East. In Latin America, though, much of this process of democratization only took place in the 1980s and 1990s, despite the fact that the area had much more of a foundation for democratization and a Western-oriented culture and religion.

The problem is not the essence, culture, or theology of the Arab world and Iran but the prevailing political and ideological system there. It is not that the Arab system failed to adapt to modern times. It has adapted very well to modern times in terms of keeping bad regimes in power. Again, there is a parallel to European history, Europe in the process of

modernization developed two phenomena called communism and fascism, which arose as reactions against modernization and created incredible problems. Millions of people died in this process in Europe. In the Middle East there have been two parallel phenomena called Arab nationalism and Islamism.

In the modernization process--which includes democratization, industrialization, individualism, equality for women, urbanization, a weakening of religion, the development of mass commercial culture, and many other phenomena--a long time is needed, obstacles are thrown in the way, and movements arise which oppose these changes. One of the critical differences in the Middle East is that the retrograde movements have almost completely taken over all the political systems, control the economic system, and enjoy hegemony over thought. Groups and classes which spearheaded the drive to democracy and liberalization elsewhere in the world-- students, intellectuals, labor unions, and businesspeople, for example--have been co-opted as supporters for the system. So overwhelming is its hegemony and ability to avoid blame for its failings--especially by putting them onto foreign scapegoats--that it is very hard to challenge and has tremendous power to intimidate its critics.

I wrote a book, *The Tragedy of the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), in which I tried to explain what the system is. It is a very fully developed system and includes everything from how you handle the military (for example, multiple forces including ethnic and ideological ones; special privileges); how you have a doctrine that justifies dictatorship (blaming Western imperialism and Zionism for all problems; maintaining a permanent state of war); how you win the support of the masses (control of media, schools, and even mosques); and how you build a sufficient base to stay in power (demagoguery, ideology, rewards, repression).

These systems--and obviously every country is different in some ways--are very effective at staying in power. The problem is that they are far less effective at bringing higher living standards, economic progress, more freedom, social change and things like that. Repression is only one element of the system and sometimes it is one of the least important aspects. For a rough analogy, think of the kind of system that existed in the Soviet bloc but even stronger. After all, in the Soviet bloc, religion and nationalism were often opposed to the prevailing regime. In contrast, in the Middle East these are two powerful tools manipulated by the regime or the Islamist opposition with which it has so much in common.

In short, Arab liberals are fighting against an incredibly powerful system, well-skilled at staying in power, at discrediting them, and at manipulating symbols. They have a very difficult uphill battle.

Given this challenge, how do Arab liberals deal with the issues they face? After all, if they are going to argue for major structural reforms and all that entails, they must offer alternative explanations and solutions for the prevailing issues in their countries.

What are some of these critical issues? First, there is the explanation of why the Arab world is facing so many problems, why it is in such bad shape. The official answer tends to be imperialism and Zionism has held back the Arab world. Not only are the Arab regimes not at fault, but they must act as they do in order to survive and defeat the enemy.

Arab liberals have a choice of responses. One response can be an anti-system strategy. The reason for the mess in the Arab world is, "Because these dictatorships are in power. They are bad and incompetent. We must overthrow them in some way and institute democracy."

A second choice is to agree with the rulers by saying, "Yes you are right, the problem is imperialism and Zionism. But

the system you have in place doesn't face them effectively. So make the reforms that we want and then you can combat them much more effectively." Just as the Islamists offer their form of Islam as the only way to fulfill the existing goals, the liberals can do the same with their philosophy.

The third option is a more technocratic approach: "What we really need are certain economic and structural reforms, as China has done, that allow us to perform better without having to change the political system. So we are not against you, the government, we want to work with you to make it more likely you survive.

Finally, a fourth, related, approach is to offer the regimes an alliance against the radical Islamists. Only the liberals' ideas and methods can defeat the great common threat, they argue. The regimes may play along but understand that they have more to gain by appeasing the conservatives however much they pretend to sympathize with the reformers.

The problem is that if the liberals follow any but the first choice, they are far more likely to be coopted, their message watered down and their arguments used largely to reinforce the existing system. Yet if they follow the first alternative they are more likely to be repressed by the rulers and ignored (or more likely, condemned) by the masses.

On every issue--whether it be women's rights, the United States, Israel, Islam, the Iraq war, etc--the liberals have a choice of different courses to take, all of them pretty unattractive.

Aside from the substance of the argument--with which the Arab nationalists and Islamists have a much easier time--is the regime's control of the means of expression. It can ensure that the schools, media, and (in some cases) mosques follow its line. The Arab nationalists and Islamists have far more money and many times more supporters than do the liberals. They have a

complex network of rewards and punishments to spread their influence.

They also have a range of highly effective ways of sabotaging the liberals. Some of these might be called Middle East McCarthyism. The liberals are said to be traitors, agents in the pay of the Americans or Zionist agents, operating out of greed and sabotaging Arab society. They are said to be importing inappropriate, alien ideas which will bring ethnic strife or an Islamist takeover.

What is an Arab liberal to do? Should he say, "To call America our enemy is a lie. We need good relations with the United States. Its pro-democracy policy is a positive thing." Or should he keep his distance from America, covering that country with scorn in order to protect himself and pander to his audience.

Should an Arab liberal say, "The overthrow of Saddam Hussein is a good thing and a chance for a breakthrough to democracy," or should he make it seem as if the main fault of that regime was to go too far and thus provoke foreign intervention.

Can an Arab liberal advocate peace with Israel or claim he has a more effective way to destroy it?

Difficult as these issues are, they pale in comparison with the difficult question of Islam. Historically, many democratic reformers in the West and elsewhere were secular and anti-religious. Look at the French revolution. Look at the Italian revolutionary nationalist tradition. Even the Arab left of decades ago argued that religion was a counterproductive opiate of the masses. But obviously this is not a very effective tactic for Arab liberals to follow today.

A second option is to say that Islam should be a matter of private life. It should not be in the public arena. Or reformers could say, "Let us work with those people who have more liberal interpretations of Islam." If they choose the former path, they are likely to be ignored; picking the latter,

they will find very few partners. Once again, there is no easy way out.

Having said all this about the structural problems, the ideological difficulties, the difficulty in winning mass support, the repression, and so on, it is not surprising that the movement is very weak. It controls almost no institutions, except a few think tanks, or media outlets. There are no secret societies of sympathetic military officers, no strongholds in universities. Outside of Kuwait, there are virtually no real liberal parties, and even there a poor electoral performance shows the limit of popular support. There is not even any liberated reformist territory, no liberal equivalent of Moscow or Tehran. Iraq could possibly fill that gap, but events since Saddam's overthrow give little cause for hope.

How sharply this contrasts with the history of Asia, Africa, or Latin America! Those places were and are full of liberal intellectuals, businesspeople, journalists, universities, newspapers, political parties, and just about every other form of endeavor. There are attempts to create such newspapers, television stations, and even universities. They are praiseworthy, but the process is barely in its infancy. The liberals are outgunned in every sector of society. It is going to take a long time to change this situation.

Then let us turn to the people. Arab liberals like to say that the masses are really a silent majority which supports them. There are some indications of this in polls but these are not clear-cut. Of course, people do not speak their real feelings as they live within a dictatorship. But I suggest it is reasonable to argue that there is a broad and genuine sympathy for radical Arab nationalist and Islamist positions. Some of this is due to indoctrination, constant propaganda. Some is due to rewards and things like ethnic loyalties--of Alawites in Syria and Sunnis in Iraq--or communal nationalism in religious form for Islamists-- Sunnis in Syria and Shi'a in Iraq. But it is

there. It is dangerously misleading to look at the Arab masses as closet liberals.

When I tell people that I am writing a book on liberal Arabs, the standard joke is that it must be a short book. My response is to say, "No, on the contrary, there is a lot of material because the ideas and discussions are so interesting." But it is also true to admit that one must refer again and again to the same individuals, a courageous but small group which is far more often heard and is far better known in the West rather than the Middle East.

It is necessary here to say something about Islamism. This issue cannot be glossed over. True, radical Islamism inspires a lot of opposition among Arabs horrified that they would have to live in such a regime. In one Western poll series, Arab respondents were asked what kind of political system they favored. They were told to choose between an Islamic system or a democratic system. The majority chose a democratic system, which was used to argue that this was their true feeling. But when this is the choice, all the existing Arab regimes are classified as "democratic." This does not tell us about support for democracy but rather support for the status quo among those frightened by the prospect of an Islamist revolution.

Today, Islamism--not liberalism--is the main opposition movement and alternative doctrine in every Arab state. Now on one hand, Arab nationalism and Islamism are completely opposed and they are engaged in a struggle for power. On the other hand, they reinforce each other's arguments on many points in an anti-liberal direction.

In addition, every liberal has to deal with what can be called "Islamist threat." In other words, if we consider Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Algeria as examples, citizens must pick between these two powerful forces against which liberal reformism is a minor factor. Do you want the Saudi monarchy or bin Ladin, the Algerian junta or the Islamists, President Husni Mubarak

or Ayman al-Zawahiri? Like it or not, it is a credible argument when regimes warn that there will be anarchy, violence, and the possibility of Islamist revolution if people tinker with the status quo. Post-Saddam Iraq is an extremely graphic demonstration of that point.

So how do you deal with that? Now, if you are an Algerian liberal, what do you do? Do you say, "We have a military regime, we have an Islamist opposition, so I am for a third way." Or do you say, "If I had to choose between them--and I do--I support the regime." I think the latter path is the one that far more people are going to take.

There is a popular song in Egypt which shows how the anti-liberal forces put their case so effectively using nationalist and religious appeals: "Better Saddam's Hell Than Bush's Heaven." But there is also a phrase that could be used in Saudi Arabia that illustrates the equally effective use of this choice to gain support for the status quo: Better the Saudi monarchy's hell than bin Ladin's heaven."

All of these multiple factors undercut liberalism. Nineteenth-century Western liberals battled monarchies, many of which gave a large latitude for democracy, secularism, free enterprise, and cultural freedom--far more than is available in the Arab world today. Only when Western liberalism was stronger, even fairly hegemonic, did it have to confront Communism and fascism. And when it did so, liberalism fought this battle by being in control of powerful countries which defeated these enemies. Arab liberals must fight a highly organized, ideologically coherent, well-armed enemy in their movement's infancy.

In short, we should not underestimate the power of the status quo, how long the process is going to take, how many setbacks it will suffer, and even whether it can triumph at all in anything other than a very long time span. More than one leading Arab liberal has said something

like, "There are only two possible futures for the Arab world. One is Islam and the other is democracy." I don't think that is accurate. The status quo, perhaps with minor modifications, is a third option. People think of the Middle East as an unstable part of the world. But in fact, literally in the last thirty years no Arab regime has really changed with the exception of Sudan and Yemen.

So we have to be realistic. This is going to be an extended struggle, and it is going to go on for decades. The outcome is not inevitable or simple. The forces of liberalism are weak. Will they grow stronger? I think they will, but how much stronger? How quickly?

Now, I do not want to get into the policy issues, but I will just make one remark here, which is external influence is going to be limited under any conditions. Let us say just for the sake of discussion that external influence is not going to be more than ten or twenty percent of the equation. Is that effect important and useful? Is it worth doing? Absolutely yes, but it is extremely hard to do right.

But again much of the talk about these issues is a debate that has more to do with Washington than with the reality of the Middle East. It is easy and common for people to talk as if Washington is the only place that matters. There is much ignorance about these matters in the United States, which usually goes in the direction of overstating the U.S. role. Some argue that U.S. policy is responsible for the sad state of the region; others that it can easily fix these problems. Both concepts are wrong.

These issues are going to be fought out and dealt with by the people in the region who are going to succeed or fail by the arguments that they make, the struggles they wage, and the tactics they adopt.

Let me repeat: good policy and good scholarship begins with a clear-eyed, unsentimental, non-partisan and honest attempt to understand reality. If things are

not the way we would like them to be then we must begin by trying to accept that fact and to figure out whether it is possible to bridge that gap and how it could be done.

Now, I have not fully done justice to the subject. There are dozens more points to discuss but I hope to have touched on some important points that might be new and useful to you.

Tamara Cofman Wittes: I want to thank Barry for setting up my remarks so well. I don't want to dispute the essential analysis that he has given, which is that liberals are weak, are limited in number and influence, and face a tremendous series of dilemmas when they attempt to act in the political sphere. What I will differ with him on, though, is the root of that difficult situation, and what might be done to change it and to give liberals a better shot.

In the last few weeks, we have seen some written analyses of Arab liberalism that argue that liberal elites are increasingly aging, increasingly isolated, and diminishing in number. They are said to be an endangered species. It is stated that they are not the vanguard of democracy in the Middle East, Islamists are. The implication of all these expert opinions is that it is perhaps misguided, or even folly, for U.S. policy to embrace and to support this beleaguered and. perhaps ultimately, hapless group as the centerpiece of its efforts to democratize the Arab world.

What I would like to do is to probe the common wisdom about Arab liberals on several points that center around this question of what U.S. policy attitudes towards this group should be.

First, it is undoubtedly true, as an empirical matter, that Arab liberals are in the minority among politically active Arabs, and they appear to be out of the mainstream of what we can find out about public opinion. I will ask why this is the case and whether that means that, in fact, liberals are

not likely to be effective voices on behalf of democratic change in their societies.

Second, I will ask how Arab liberals are--and might become--positioned relative to their own society's political evolution and relative to U.S. policy in the region. In other words, what can we expect from Arab liberals as the region continues to struggle with questions of political change, and what should we *not* expect from them?

Third, I will suggest what role the U.S. can play in influencing the fate of Arab liberals.

Let me start, though, by contending with just one point Barry made towards the end of his presentation: that in his view the status quo remains an option in the Arab world. While I would agree that the political systems in most Arab states today retain a wide variety of powerful tools to sustain the ruling regimes in power, it appears to me as a social scientist that the demographics and the economics in the region are such that those regimes are rubbing up against the limit of their ability to use those tools effectively. I think that, more than anything else, this is what has driven liberals in the region and others in the region to discuss questions of reform. As we all know, the United States came fairly late to this conversation. So, the internally generated logic of change, I think, will continue to play itself out regardless of what attitude the United States may or may not take.

I want to start by saying that in every society liberals are a fairly small elite group that in many ways is isolated from the grassroots. It was true in revolutionary America; it was true in enlightenment Europe; it was true in Eastern Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Liberals are not usually that popular. Liberalism is not a populist ideology. But I do want to dispute the idea that liberals in the Arab world are aging and decreasing in number. It may be that liberal intellectuals in the tradition of those who flourished in the early decades of the 20th century in the

Arab world are aging and decreasing in number and that's just a fact of life.

But there is a younger generation of liberals who are not necessarily all journalists and novelists: they are businessmen, they are lawyers, they are doctors and they are parliamentarians. Many of you in this room know them well and work with them every day--and they are fairly pragmatic in their approach to promoting liberal politics and liberal ideas. I think that is precisely why we need to pay careful attention to what they are doing and saying. But whether liberal visions of government can win sufficient support from Arab publics to gain ground against state socialism, against Islamism, and against those other alternatives, that is the real question. I don't think we can answer that question yet.

It is very important, as Barry suggests, to understand the reasons why liberals remain a small weak elite group in the Arab world. Barry has argued in some of his previous writing that obviously the answer involves state repression, but that the biggest obstacle to liberals raising their voice is that they are drowned out and discredited by people who are willing to play the Palestine card and otherwise deflect the national conversation toward pan-Arab or anti-colonial issues and away from domestic political problems.

I think that is no doubt true, to a degree--but I would argue that that is not the biggest obstacle that Arab liberals face today. Arab liberals over the past year in particular have found their voice to an amazing extent, and are standing up to express their concerns and beliefs in spite of not only a continuing *intifada* but also the US invasion of Iraq, and indeed, some of them would say *because* of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The biggest obstacle Arab liberals face in becoming a stronger and more relevant force in Arab politics today, by my analysis, is that liberals today are trying to play on a field that is tilted very much

against them. Our contribution from the outside to liberalism and ultimately to democratization in the Arab world in the coming years should be our assiduous work to level this playing field. I will return to this point at the end to explain what I mean by that and what we can do to help make it happen. But let me first give you the diagnosis.

Arab regimes, whether republican or monarchical, have managed to strictly control most arenas of public discussion and debate, but they have never been able to fully control religious institutions--and religious authorities have always maintained sufficient independent authority in society that regimes have had to co-opt them rather than controlling them entirely. Indeed, when Islamist oppositions and violent Islamist movements began to gain strength in many countries, including secular Baathist countries like Syria and Iraq, the regimes responded by ceding certain social arenas to the Islamists in order to co-opt them, while at the same time violently repressing the radical Islamists who couldn't be co-opted.

As a result, I think you have seen over the last 20-25 years, over the last generation basically, many Arab societies who have seen their educational systems, their TV and radio airtime, and sometimes even more, their streets and their stores artificially Islamicized. While most arenas of political debate have been controlled, the religious institutions have always retained their ability to discuss public policy and political issues through their language of religion. In this way, the regimes have maintained control--and they have also maintained the Islamists as the only viable alternative to their rule. So you have, in fact, a tacit, and in some cases not a tacit but an outright, bargain between these two groups.

This is the process that, over the past quarter century, has placed Arab liberals in the very difficult situation that Barry described. The longer that we on the

outside press Arab regimes to undertake reform that doesn't involve opening new arenas for freedom of speech and freedom of association, the more the Islamists are the ones who are going to benefit most from the limited liberalization that occurs, while other political tendencies, liberals and others, are going to remain locked out or forced, as Barry said, to work within the system, to try and make their influence felt within the ruling party, within the ruling family. So in the public eye, the Islamists become more and more firmly entrenched, more prominent, and the only political alternative to the status quo; meanwhile liberals and other alternatives are seen, at best, as irrelevant, and at worst, they become closely associated with the failings of the current regime.

So if Islamists are the vanguard of democratic politics today--a fact that is making democracy in the Arab world something that some people in Washington fear instead of embrace--that is an artificial situation, because Islamists haven't really had to compete. If liberals are weak, that is because they haven't had the chance to make their case. So, of course, if free elections were held tomorrow in most Arab countries, Islamist candidates and parties would predominate. But I don't think we could make a proper assessment of what Arab democracy is likely to bring in a situation this artificially controlled.

Now, the first conclusion from this fact is that we shouldn't assume that the current lack of popular support for liberal ideas and politicians is a meaningful indicator of their prospects in the event of eventual democratization. We shouldn't assume that they *will* get support, but we can't assume that they *won't*. The second conclusion is that we shouldn't allow this artificial advantage for Islamists to continue, or we risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy about Islamist victories and Islamists being the only ones to triumph in democratic politics.

Today, in this artificial situation, many Arab liberals--and the U.S. government, frankly--are choosing to support regimes' efforts at controlled gradual liberalization as a hedge against the Islamists. What I am suggesting to you is that, not only is that not an effective strategy, but it is a counterproductive strategy.

So, assume for the moment that this public square could be opened up and that alternatives to Islamist political voices could make themselves heard, could have the ability to organize, to gain adherents, to exercise their views publicly. What can we expect? What can we expect from the Arab liberals and what should we not expect from them?

I think we can expect them to voice their views without hesitation and without relying on others to set their agenda. By others, I mean not only outside actors like the U.S., but also the regimes themselves by mouthing words about reform. Arab liberals need to define and articulate the priorities they see for change within their own societies and we should attend to and support those priorities. So for example, having women political candidates, which we have made a big priority in our government-supported democracy assistance programs, might be less of a priority for Arab liberals than having more women doctors, or having women's rights to property protected by law and enforced in the courts.

We shouldn't expect that Arab liberal views on policy issues will always accord with our own--I think that is obvious; demanding support for US policy goals from those who receive our funding and assistance is a death knell for their domestic legitimacy and for their trust in our support for democracy as opposed to our support for a particular political outcome. That said, I think that the argument that any assistance from America or the West to Arab liberals is a kiss of death, is an argument that is largely overblown.

I think we can expect Arab liberals to make their views known to their governments, but we shouldn't expect them all to be dissidents. We should not expect them all to be absolutists, to operate outside the system and declare themselves wholly in opposition to existing regimes. A lot of the more neo-conservative discussion of Arab liberalism seems to paint Arab liberals as though they were the natural successors to Eastern European and Soviet dissidents, that they're oppressed outsiders calling attention to the fundamental illegitimacy of the ruling regime. I think there is also a broader sense among some in the United States that, in order for liberal democracy to be realized in Arab states, civil society has to stand entirely in opposition to government. But Arab liberal activists by and large have not acquiesced in this dichotomy and I think that is appropriate.

The Middle East is not like Eastern Europe, where regimes were externally imposed, where their legitimating ideologies were essentially alien and fundamentally illegitimate. Arab regimes have *impaired* legitimacy because of poor performance; because of the decline of their post-colonial ideologies, but they do retain some legitimacy. It is this legitimacy that is galvanized by our forceful interventions into the region.

Arab liberals are struggling to make their case in the face of this continued nationalist legitimacy that the regimes enjoy. I think the key is for liberals and for other opposition figures to gain a certain degree of confidence in their own nationalism, in their own ability to make the case for globalization and democratization being good for their own society. Not to cede the language of nationalism and national identity to regimes, just as they shouldn't cede the language of Islam to Islamist radicals. I think that Arab liberals are beginning to do this in some places and in some cases, and I think some of them are doing it by working within the existing system, taking advantages of opportunities

given them in the courts; in parliament; in the ruling parties; in newly sanctioned government-sponsored NGOs.

But I think that, even in those countries where liberals are now trying to exploit openings in the existing system, there may indeed come a time when liberals will have to give up trying to persuade their governments and turn into a genuine anti-regime opposition movement. But where liberals are still testing how much they can achieve by persuasion, we should support them in this effort. We shouldn't require them to serve as a foil to maximize the contradictions of the existing system and we should also support them, of course, when they fail at persuasion and suffer the consequences of their challenge, as Saad Eddin Ibrahim discovered. One consequence of this analysis is that it is inevitable that, as liberals begin truly to compete and to compete in the local public square as opposed to competing for our attention, they will probably act and sound more nationalist than they do today.

Looking at the region today, versus looking at it even five years ago, I don't see how anyone can say that liberals have not found their voice. In the past year alone, if we have seen a tremendous number of meetings, statements, petitions, communiqués and the founding of movements and organizations to perpetuate their views, even in situations where founding those organizations is rather difficult and sometimes even illegal. Privately, and I think increasingly publicly, Arab liberal activists are saying that explicit pressure from the United States on democratization has helped them raise their voices by forcing their leaders to discuss previously taboo issues and by extending them in a way, a sort of rhetorical umbrella of protection to speak about those issues.

Given this renewed sense of mission and this rediscovered voice among Arab liberals, what should the U.S. be doing? As I said, I think the first thing we should do is to work to level the playing field, so that

regimes and the Islamist opposition are not the only actors able to project political ideas to the public. Doing this requires the United States, first of all, to clearly state and prioritize in our talks with Arab governments the need to provide for and protect fundamental rights of free expression, free press and free association so that liberal spokesmen can make their message heard; so that liberals can build organizations and demonstrate the strength of their public following.

Second, I think the U.S. government needs to be talking with these individuals in depth *prior to* every high-level U.S. visit to their countries or visit of their officials here. I think it was great that Secretary Powell took the time to meet with Egyptian activists during his recent trip to Cairo. But I hope that those same activists had a shot at putting talking points on his agenda for his meeting with Mubarak *before* he got to Cairo. I don't know that that was the case. My understanding is that, even within the U.S. government, it is difficult to get those talking points on the agenda.

Leveling the playing field, for the United States, also means recognizing and embracing the tradeoffs that this strategy requires. We shouldn't be wasting our political capital with the friendly Arab regimes, asking them to show up at some multilateral forum on reform. Instead we should be tightly focused on achieving meaningful gains in freedom inside Arab countries. I think we have to trust in our mutual interests with these governments, in our longstanding relations with them, to carry our conversations with them past the point of initial rejection.

I think the second thing we can do--and I will end here--is to support the liberals' growing efforts at networking, at organization-building and agenda-setting within their own countries and across the region. That is where the work of organizations like the NED are so important. But it doesn't mean training them

how to fill out grant applications to western agencies or prepare budget accountability reports or give congressional testimony. It means funding their travel and logistics so they can meet with one another, so that they can gain strength from one another's experiences. I think, too, it might help to give them opportunities to network with and learn from liberal activists in others parts of the developing world, Serbia, Georgia, South Korea, Central America and so on.

I think, for the U.S. government, this last point is perhaps the most important: that we need to distinguish between democracy promotion and public diplomacy. We should not be insisting that every activity that takes place in the region that is funded with American money gets an American stamp on it. Democracy promotion is not about making us look good. If we are promoting democracy in the region on behalf of our own national security interests and because we believe the long-term strength, the long-term stability of the region demands it; that is true whether or not people who end up voting in those societies like our policies. I think that is perhaps one reason for more of the assistance to be directed through non-governmental as opposed to governmental agencies, because I think the bureaucratic imperative to put the American stamp on it is just too strong from inside.

So, to help these liberals win their struggle, which is very much an uphill battle, I do think we need to enable their successes but not to claim them as our own. I will stop there. Thank you.

Laith Kubba: Thank you. With the ten minutes at my disposal, I will focus on where I disagree. There is a lot I agree with on recommendations made and issues raised. But I would like to focus more on areas open to criticism.

Firstly, I think I disagree with the notion of both speakers that Arab liberals are really too weak or so weak to the extent

that if we give them space then they are not going to prevail. We need to ask a question, if Arab liberals are there, why don't we see them, why don't we hear them, why aren't they influential in politics? And that is a very legitimate question. But to answer that we need to look at two things: one, what is our definition and conception of Arab liberals? What sort of Arab liberalism are we talking about? Two, what are the patterns of behavior of those liberals under tough conditions of authoritarianism. Then I think we can explore the undercurrents of liberalism in Arab countries, which way they are heading and of course the most critical question, would they benefit from an open space or would they lose out more in such an open space?

I think first one must create a clear distinction between home-grown liberalism and western-grown liberalism. I think liberalism in its classic definition looks at anchored and self-individual values, freedom of expression, freedom of enterprise, all the basic freedoms that one has. Liberalism went through a long, unique journey, emerged in the West, within a Western culture, where it had a discourse on loosening up from religion and religious control, from state control, from monarchies, etc. Ultimately, it manifested itself in a Western lifestyle. I think in terms of values, the fundamental values that define liberalism, we will have a real problem in adopting and seeing these values in Arab countries.

I will go even further to argue clearly and strongly that looking at Islam--and not anything that is labeled Islamic, but looking at Islam in its original sense--it is, like the previous Abrahamic religions: anchored in individual salvation, it focuses on individual responsibility, individual rights, the right to choose, and the right of freedom, etc. Looking at theses values in the original text, I do not think fundamentally there is a problem in establishing and adopting these values. But

looking at the culture in Arab and Muslim countries, that is a slightly different issue.

If I want to look at the history, there have been liberal currents in Arab countries in the last hundred years. I can look at three cities that tell the story; someone actually briefed them as the BBC: Baghdad, Beirut, and Cairo. I think if you look at these three cities a hundred years ago when they were just post-Ottoman, there was an open space, modern constitutions, and there was natural growth of liberal currents. These currents manifested themselves in independent associations, NGO syndicates, independent media and literature, in flourishing cultures and religions, and diversity within the society. However, these liberal currents comfortably grew out of conservative societies. Traditional societies were not the real obstacles. The real obstacle that crushed liberalism was the state authoritarianism, military authoritarianism in particular, that arose and assumed full control over public space and could not tolerate liberal tendencies.

What are the patterns of behavior for liberals? I totally underline and agree with Tamara when she described liberals in general as being of diverse opinions--they are not populist movements. It is not an ideology; it is not an -ism in a sense like all the totalitarian views. Among liberals, we have a wide range of views toward religion, towards the state, towards development, and we have a wide range of political attitudes and positions. Hence, we do find many or some liberal intellectuals who were compromised by the state, who started moving along on a nationalist discourse, maybe being used in that respect. But in general, liberals tend to stay low when they are threatened, purely because they are liberals, they are pragmatists, they want to survive and look after their own values, and if the atmosphere is wrong, they are the first ones to go in hiding and stay low and they are the last ones to emerge. I think the currents are very much there despite tough conditions.

If we want to look at what conditions normally encourage, and are associated with, liberal tendencies, it is the level of development and education which are in line with, and in favor of, liberal currents. If you ask what are their politics, I agree that we need not associate liberalism in Arab countries with political positions aligned with Western countries or with the United States. Liberals can be critical of the West and of diverse views--they have to look after their national interests. Liberals can disagree amongst themselves on issues, if they are Arabs or Kurds, or if they are conservatives or not. There is full diversity of political views among liberals and I think we need to look at our definition as to what liberalism is, and define it in a much broader sense.

Maybe I will move to the most important point here being a senior program officer at NED and giving grants and supporting trends that will encourage liberalization in Arab countries. I think the argument here is extremely sensitive and important. Is the problem really weak liberal currents because of culture, because of religion or whatever, or is the problem lack of space? I tend to argue strongly that the problem is in the conditions and the lack of space and the way states have crushed the space that could have naturally nurtured these liberal tendencies. I think also that the focus should be not as you quite rightly said, on simply supporting those who we handpick in groups or individuals but supporting the liberalization process at large. I make a clear distinction between Westernization and liberalization.

I don't think we need to narrow down our definition of liberalizing the political process to simply Westernization. When it comes to a vote of confidence, despite all the gloom that is out there, I think the undercurrents are strong. Liberals will benefit more from the open space that is created through the media and through the internet. I think they are benefiting more from the failures of authoritarian states. In the short term, yes, they will not win the first round in elections, but I think ultimately they are going to influence the culture and thinking, even for example, of Islamic parties. I can see lots of liberal currents that are pushing Islamic parties to reinterpret religion and readjust their worldviews, because, after all, a good part of the liberal discourse is focused on religion itself. I will stop here.

BIOGRAPHIES

Barry Rubin, is Director of the Global Research and International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, and editor of the Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA). His recent books include Yasir Arafat, a Political Biography and Anti-American Terrorism in the Middle East (Oxford University Press) and The Tragedy of the Middle East. (Cambridge University Press). He is completing a book on Arab liberals and their struggle.

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