

The Road to Democracy in the Arab World

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The 2003 American invasion of Iraq was designed to establish a new democratic foothold in the Middle East. In so doing, it sought not only to offer an enlightening example to the oppressed peoples of the region and a warning to the autocrats who rule them, but also to set the entire region on a course toward liberalization and peaceful coexistence with the West. Yet, in the nearly four years since the invasion began, and despite the Bush administration's promotion of democracy in other Arab states, the region has become significantly less stable from the point of view of Western interests, and more hostile towards Western values.¹

To many, this reality is proof of a fundamental incompatibility between Western forms of government and Arab society. In their view, liberal democracy (or anything approaching it) cannot possibly bloom on Arab soil, since Arab societies are so profoundly different than the West.² Thus, President Bush's gravest mistake—and the source of his democratization initiative's failure—lay in ignoring the uniqueness of Arab society and attempting to force an alien and unwanted form of government upon it. According to this thinking, the fate of America's campaign in Iraq was sealed even before the first shot was fired.

This essentialist view of Arab society, while commonplace in the West, is flawed. In truth, there is nothing unique to Arab societies that results in a preference for despotic regimes. Arab society does not possess an inborn aversion to freely elected governments, and particularly ones that uphold the basic freedoms of the individual; on the contrary, there is abundant evidence that liberal democracy can exist in the Arab world. Arab societies are, as history demonstrates, as likely to undergo the process of democratization as are any other societies to which this form of government was once foreign. Neither, for that matter, are they subject to any meta-historical imperative (of the kind that some scholars dress up as “cultural heritage”) that determines their fate as free men or slaves.

President Bush was not wrong, then, to place the democratization of the Middle East at the top of his administration’s agenda. Rather, his mistake was the poor implementation of a morally and strategically good policy. In short, Bush failed to grasp the ideological foundations of Arab resistance to the Western form of government.

The lackluster appeal of the liberal idea in Arab societies is the result of a specific paradigm that equates the adoption of Western-style governance with submission to the economic interests and religious faith of the United States. It is, in fact, one of the main reasons for the persistence of undemocratic regimes in the Arab world, as well as the ideological fuel propelling jihadists both inside and outside of Iraq.

There is no truth to the claim that the Arabs have never had any contact with democracy. Just the opposite is the case: Democracy has historic, if not particularly fruitful, roots in Arab societies. In fact, it is this very experience with democracy that makes their approach to it more complex and guarded than that of other cultures.

The Arab acquaintance with democracy began as far back as 1829, when Muhammad Ali, one of the founders of modern Egypt and the governor

of the Ottoman district, announced the establishment of a “consultative council” (*majlis al-mashwara*).³ The council was based on the Islamic principle of *Shura*, whose standard interpretation requires a ruler to include the community in the decision-making process. Both the council’s structure and its presentation to the public demonstrated the contradictions bound up with the question of democracy in the Middle East in subsequent decades: First, between dependence on a traditional political model on the one hand, and the establishment of outwardly Western political institutions on the other; and second, in creating ostensibly representative institutions while retaining monopolistic sovereignty in the hands of the ruler. Indeed, although the council’s members were appointed and their role purely advisory, Arab intellectuals nonetheless drew a connection between the council, parliamentarianism, and Western democracy. Egypt’s official newspaper regularly compared the council to institutions such as the British parliament and the French National Assembly, and Riffa Rafe al-Tahtawi, principal of the Egyptian school of languages and head of the government department of translations, used the word *Shura* to describe institutions like the U.S. Congress.⁴

Until the end of the eighteenth century, in fact, liberal principles enjoyed a measure of support in Arab societies, often through emphasis on the parallels between Western-style government and *Shura*. The turning point came after World War I, with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent establishment of the Arab states. With the West’s victory, democracy ceased to be the preserve of a handful of Western nations. Now, it was a concept with universal pretensions. Middle-class Arab society felt the first stirrings of a national, liberal consciousness: Government officials, lawyers, journalists, and merchants familiar with Western political models saw in them a suitable alternative to the traditional, yet eroding, frameworks for their own identity. Moreover, these models held out the promise of liberation from foreign rule: The West’s strength, it seemed clear, lay in its political system, and adopting this system was the surest—perhaps only—means to success.

After the war, the idea of liberal democracy took firm hold in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. In these countries, the middle classes were the driving force behind the push for a liberal constitution, even before Great Britain and France (known as the Powers) were ready to support one. The liberal viewpoint also spread to Arab territories not ruled as mandated regions, or still lacking a genuine middle class. In Kuwait, for example, then under British influence, a merchants' organization was established in 1921 to demand that the emir institutionalize their participation in the decision-making process.⁵ Even Ibn Saud, the only Arab leader not under the rule of the Powers in the 1920s, was forced to order the establishment of a "residents' council," elected by ballot and entrusted with both legislative and executive powers, when the idea of free elections and representational government became so popular in the Arab world as to be a near condition for domestic and international legitimization of his 1924-1925 conquest of the Hijaz strip.⁶

During the same period, the West performed a dual function in the inculcation of liberal democracy in the Middle East. On the one hand, Britain and France acted as political mentors, helping to move Arab societies towards full independence; they aided in the establishment of a political system that would guarantee fair competition between parties, freedom of speech and inquiry, freedom of assembly, and equal rights for women and minorities. On the other hand, the Powers also sought to promote their own strategic interests and bolstered the status of political forces loyal to the West. This duality inevitably resulted in a deep mistrust of Western forms of government in the Arab world: Arabs largely perceived it as a fraud, an illusion intended to distract them while the West perpetuated its domination of the Middle East. They came to regard democracy as a synonym for the underhanded promotion of foreign interests. This is where the Gordian knot of the Arab democratic question emerged: The West was seared into Arab consciousness as a liberator that is also a conqueror, and liberal democracy as a solution that is also a problem.

The fledgling Arab democracies survived, fragile and artificial as they were, so long as the Powers remained in the region. When their Western

patrons left, they quickly fell apart. Yet the failure of this political experiment did not dim the appeal of democracy as an idea. In fact, the Arab regimes that arose at the end of the 1940s from the ruins of these failed liberal enterprises presented themselves as the “true” embodiments of democracy. And indeed, they did adopt the idea that a citizenry should enjoy basic freedoms and the right to elect its government—in theory. They also *theoretically* adopted the belief that this concept should be institutionalized through written laws and in representative institutions whose forms were copied from the West. In practice, however, these regimes insisted that there were various ways to implement democracy, and various stops on the road leading to it.

Initially, for example, the Free Officers in Egypt and the Baath leaders in Syria claimed to be spearheading a “transitional” stage during which their societies would be freed from Western interests and gain equal economic footing with their Western counterparts. They claimed that once this stage was complete, it would be possible for the re-establishment of a “true” political democracy. Yet when this transitional period was extended indefinitely, and power remained in the hands of a small group of unelected revolutionaries for a protracted period, the regimes were quick to deflect blame. It was the fault, they insisted, of their societies’ lack of readiness, or, better yet, of their enemies in the West.⁷ The situation was similar in several of the more conservative Arab countries: Kuwait and Bahrain, for example, began their independence as parliamentary emirates in which the people’s representative had real legislative authority. In short order, however, their constitutions were suspended, the elected assemblies were dissolved, and opposition leaders were incarcerated. All the while, the rulers presented these steps as a temporary “freezing” of political freedoms whose goal was the revival and revitalization of “authentic” democratic life. Thus did Arab regimes declare themselves the standard-bearers of the democratic ideal, even as they insisted it was not yet possible to implement this ideal on account of the ever-present threat of instability.⁸

This chasm separating the democratic rhetoric and despotic reality of the Arab regimes did not go unnoticed. But demands that the situation be corrected, voiced from the early 1950s to the early 1980s, were not, for the most part, of a liberal nature. Reformists did not see in Western democracy a recipe for the improvement of a country's political, economic, and cultural situation, since, to their mind, this recipe had already been tried and found wanting. Moreover, the West was no longer enjoying hegemony; the Communist bloc now offered a political and ideological alternative to liberalism. Thus, while the United States had replaced Britain and France as the Western power with the greatest influence in the Middle East, that influence, starting in the early 1950s, was limited by the cold war balance of power.⁹

The demise of the edifice of Soviet communism in the early 1990s led to a conceptual swing in Arab societies. Not only was the West restored to its post-World War I status as an unrivaled military and economic force in the Middle East, but so, too, did liberal democracy revert to what it was at the beginning of the century in the region: A form of government with universal pretensions.

The significance of these developments was not lost on many Arab intellectuals. At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, discussions on the universality of liberal democracy proliferated in Arab countries. Some intellectuals even dared to state openly that in the post-Soviet world, Arab countries must also go the way of liberal democracies, since the fall of communism had provided definitive proof that there are no grounds for the Arab regimes' pretense to being a link between "social democracy" (an equal social order) and "political democracy," in the same way that there are no grounds for the pretense of delaying democratic reforms in the name of creating "true" democracy. These intellectuals insisted that the type of democracy practiced in the West is the *only* type worth practicing, and is furthermore a condition for becoming an advanced and free country. Despite bitter

past experience, they demanded that the Western model of democracy be adopted in Arab countries, with no excuses, and without delay.¹⁰

Determined calls for democratization and liberalization following the demise of communism came not only from academic circles of independent Arab intellectuals, however. Soon, they had infiltrated into the pages of newspapers under strict government supervision. Several articles published in the Saudi paper *Al-Riyadh* in the summer of 1989, for example, vehemently attacked the false democracy practiced in the Arab and Third Worlds, as well as the view that liberal democracy is unique to the West. One article angrily wondered why the Arab world persists in thinking that, at best, Western democracy may be viewed from a distance, “just as one views from a distance ice-skating rinks, Big Ben, the Canadian waterfalls, voyages into space, and the lakes in Regent’s Park.”¹¹

True, the awakening of the idea of liberalism among Arab intellectuals must be viewed in context. The number of intellectuals who spoke up in favor of adopting liberal democracy was extremely small, and they lacked the audacity to lead the struggle themselves. They believed in following the example set by the “solidarity” movements, yet none of them saw themselves as a Lech Walesa or Vaclav Havel. Thus, the debate they prompted did not lead to the establishment in any Arab country of an institutionalized movement that put the question of democracy at the top of its agenda. They were the standard-bearers, but they had no followers.

Yet, despite its weaknesses, the debate among reformist intellectuals on the question of the universality of liberal democracy posed a new challenge to the political order in the Middle East. Some of these thinkers linked the collapse of the Soviet bloc to the failure of the Arab regimes’ political rhetoric, and concluded that these regimes were destined to follow ignominiously in communism’s footsteps. Moreover, these reformist thinkers translated America’s triumphalist stance into Arab terms: Like Francis Fukuyama, they, too, asked Arabs to view liberal democracy as a system of government suitable to all of humanity, and entreated them to ignore its Western roots. And like Fukuyama, they also assumed that with the collapse

of communism, the last serious ideological alternative to liberal democracy had vanished.

The re-awakening of the idea of liberalism in the Arab world was short-lived, however, for in the summer of 1990, everything changed. In August, Iraq invaded Kuwait and the United States assembled an international coalition on Saudi soil to counter Saddam Hussein's aggression. In Hussein's rapid defeat, the Arabs witnessed the total military superiority of the West over their region's strongest army.

In the eyes of many Arab intellectuals—among them even those who had been calling for political reform in the Arab world—the Gulf War served as a warning of the dangers the post-Soviet future posed to their nations and culture. Not merely a confrontation between countries, but rather the beginning of a wholesale clash of two civilizations, a struggle whose true cause is the desire of the West to quash Arab power and eradicate the very possibility of the existence of an opposing force.

Arab thinking about the war, then, ran toward an anxiety that the West would once again seek to impose its interests and values on the Arab nations, just as it had done after World War I. Thus did many Arab intellectuals infer the objective of the Gulf War from its outcome: Since the war had ended in a hard blow to the Arab state with the strongest army and an enlargement of the Western military presence in the Arab state richest in oil, then that must have been its purpose from the start. Many went so far as to describe the war as a Western conspiracy whose true goal was the realization of the vision outlined by President George Bush, Sr. of a “new world order” defined as global American hegemony and the return of the Middle East to Western-imperialistic rule.¹²

In the months after the war, this view began to dominate debates on democratic reforms in Arab states and most Arabs rejected the possibility of adopting the Western model of democracy, or even the very idea that the West might serve as a source of political inspiration.¹³ The Arab regimes were all too happy to encourage this point of view, despite the fact that many of them had been either active or passive partners in the American

coalition during the war. By means of this paradigm, they were able to justify their determination to preserve the existing political order and prevent the democratization processes that had occurred in other parts of the world. These regimes presented a series of arguments that found a ready audience among the Arab public: The West, in the guise of promoting democracy, is in fact trying to paint the world in its colors, and as such is acting in an entirely undemocratic way; if the Arabs are tempted into believing Western slogans, they will forfeit their religious, cultural, and economic assets, and abandon their families to the degeneration and permissiveness that mark Western culture; and finally, those Arab intellectuals who portray liberal democracy as a universal form of government forget the disaster that the liberal age wrought upon the Arab world at the beginning of the century.

It was thus in March 1992 that King Fahd, the politically conservative and religiously observant ruler of Saudi Arabia, stated that, "The democratic system prevailing in the world does not suit us in the region, for our people's composition and traits are different from the traits of that world. We cannot import the way in which other peoples deal [with their own affairs] in order to apply it to our people."¹⁴ During the same month, the president of Syria, Hafez al-Assad, declared at his inauguration ceremony that "Each nation has its own heritage and history, and consequently, its own culture, soul, concepts, and manners. If this were not so, our world would have been one nation, and this is not the case... even in Arab countries, you will find someone who talks about democracy and has in mind only one picture which he likes because he did not search, within himself, for any other picture."¹⁵

The Gordian knot that ensnared the question of Arab democracy after World War I had therefore tightened considerably by the beginning of the 1990s. Just as the West was once again depicted as both liberator and conqueror, problem and solution, so, too, was liberal democracy identified with the danger the United States and its allies posed to Arab culture and autonomy.

On the fringes of this development, Osama Bin Laden's terrorist movement began to grow almost unnoticed, first at the intra-Saudi level, and

later as a group with widespread Islamic pretensions. Bin Laden adopted entirely and used for the purposes of armed jihad the paradigm that described a clash between the predatory West and the Muslims struggling for their independence, and he sought to translate it into practical and militaristic terms. He exhorted the Arabs to launch a counterattack, preferably on Western soil.¹⁶ There is no small amount of irony in the fact that it was ultimately Bin Laden's actions that once again raised the question as to the suitability of Western forms of government to the Arab world.

The September 11 terror attacks became the catalyst for a new American doctrine concerning the Middle East: Despite the claims of renowned Western orientalists and Arab rulers alike, there is nothing special about Arab societies that prevents them from becoming democratic. Once again, however, this doctrine conflicted with the view of democracy held by much of the Arab world.

Drawing its inspiration from the thinking of second-generation neo-conservatives (primarily members of the Project for the New American Century),¹⁷ this new doctrine was based on four principles. First, it defined liberal democracy as a form of universal governance, suitable for all societies regardless of their culture or religion. Second, it renounced, at least rhetorically, American policy from the beginning of the cold war, which condoned alliances with unelected Arab regimes in hopes of promoting stability in the Middle East. Third, it proposed an analogy between the processes that led to the democratization of postwar Germany and Japan and of the Soviet bloc starting in the late 1980s, and those destined to bring about the democratization of the Middle East. Fourth, it defined the democratization of the Middle East as an American national interest and the best guarantor of eliminating Islamic terrorism, and called for a proactive policy of democracy promotion.¹⁸

It was on the basis of this doctrine that the United States went to war in Iraq in 2003, and so too did this doctrine serve as the basis for the

establishment, in December 2002, of the “Middle East Partnership Initiative,” and eighteen months later (together with the other industrialized nations) of the “Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa,” both of which were intended to foster political and economic reform in Arab countries.

Not surprisingly, the Arab world understood this doctrine altogether differently. For the most part, its intellectuals interpreted it as a mere continuation of traditional Western policy toward the Arab world, and not a departure from it. More than a decade earlier, the belief that democracy was a guise for Western efforts to reconquer Arab territories and plunder their natural resources had taken root in Arab thought, and current events appeared to confirm their worst fears: A large Arab country, rich in oil fields, had been conquered by the United States; American forces stationed in the Persian Gulf provided the base for this attack; and, finally, the attack was perpetrated under the banner of the call for democratic change in the Middle East. Furthermore, not only did the very scenario played out in Arab thinking at the beginning of the 1990s materialize, but the key players were also familiar: George Bush, Jr. replaced Bush Sr., then-defense secretary Dick Cheney was now vice president, and Colin Powell, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was now secretary of state.

Some Arab intellectuals have argued that Bin Laden and al-Qaida have been little more than a sideshow in the post-September 11 Middle East. They maintain that his part in America’s decision to invade Iraq was a mere pretext for the implementation of a plan that the United States had been contemplating for a long time. This plan, this theory goes, revealed the “true nature” of the American attitude toward Arabs and Muslims: One of ingrained hostility. (Some Arab writers even denied that Bin Laden played a role in the events of September 11 at all, arguing that the attack was in fact the work of Israeli or American intelligence. This conspiracy theory is the basis for the following popular Arab joke: The Israeli prime minister calls the American president on the afternoon of September 11. “I would like to express my deepest condolences, Mr. President,” says the prime minister.

“Why and what for?” asks the president. “Oops,” says the prime minister. “I forgot the time difference.”)

Indeed, most Arab intellectuals saw no need to adopt a new conceptual paradigm in order to understand the actions of the United States in Iraq. From their point of view, the paradigm proposed after the Gulf War had been vindicated by the outbreak of the new war.¹⁹

Ironically, this argument found its most forceful presentation in the pages of *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi*, the journal of the Center for Arab Unity Studies, which, at the beginning of the 1990s, was the single most active source of calls for democratization in the Arab world. Even those aligned with the sworn enemies of Saddam Hussein insisted that it was preferable for him to remain in power than be toppled by the American army. The director-general of the Center, Khair al-Din Hasib, argued that the Iraq invasion could not have come as a surprise to anyone who had followed American strategy since the end of the cold war. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, he explained, America sought to become the sole world power, and controlling the world’s supply of oil is the only way to attain this goal. Moreover, he said, if America were truly interested in Arab democracy, it would not have cooperated with Saddam Hussein in the past and opposed him only *after* he became too much of a threat to Israel.²⁰ Even the Saudi writer Turki al-Hamad, who in the early 1990s was one of the rare—albeit qualified—supporters of American culture, also attacked the United States, comparing its policies to a minefield in which Arabs should fear to tread. According to him, the American democratization initiative was aimed solely at making the Arabs dance to the West’s tune, and the success of this malicious attempt would turn Arabs into “artificial creatures, lacking color, smell, and taste.”²¹

Obviously, if the Arab world’s intellectual elite considered the American democratization initiative an insidious attempt at domination, liberalization’s chances for success would be doomed. After all, in the opinion of the United States, it was Arab intellectuals who were supposed to be at the vanguard of political change. But these intellectuals—even those who

believed in the value of liberalism—found themselves in a quandary: On the one hand, American actions in the Middle East afforded them the ideal opportunity to push for reforms; on the other hand, they were wracked by fears regarding the intentions of the Bush administration.

The 2005 Egyptian elections are an excellent example of this Arab conundrum. Declared “The Celebration of Democracy” by President Hosni Mubarak’s government, the September elections were the first time in which nine candidates were permitted to run against Mubarak. The election, however, was neither celebratory nor democratic. It was subject to a complicated and dubious amendment to the constitution that guaranteed the Mubarak family’s continued monopoly on power and a far-reaching government campaign that emphasized the distinction between internal, organic democracy, based on agreement between the incumbent government and society, and an external, imposed, American democracy that would undermine Egypt’s independence. The message was clear: Those insisting on democratization beyond the limits set by the regime were allowing Egypt to become a pawn of the West.²² To make matters worse, running against Mubarak were a number of lackluster and ineffectual candidates. There was, however, one charismatic candidate, with a clear liberal agenda: Ayman Abd al-Aziz Nour, a lawyer and member of parliament who established an independent party called Al-Rad (“Tomorrow”). Contrary to other opposition activists in Egypt, Nour was not opposed to any particular aspect of Egyptian policy, but rather to the undemocratic nature of the regime as a whole and to Mubarak’s attempts to perpetuate this state of affairs by laying the groundwork for his son’s succession. Recognizing the danger Nour posed, Mubarak’s regime arrested him on the pretext that he had forged the required signatures for registering Al-Rad. Not surprisingly, the pressure exerted by the United States to release Nour and allow him to participate in the election restored his freedom (Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice even cancelled a visit to Cairo on account of his imprisonment), but also played into the hands of the regime by portraying Nour as America’s favorite son.

On Election Day, Egyptians gave the “democratic progress” declared by Mubarak a conspicuous vote of no confidence: The official voter turnout was a mere 23 percent. Of those who turned out to vote, 88 percent chose Mubarak and only 7 percent chose Nour.²³ In December 2005, Nour was convicted of forging signatures and sentenced to five years in prison. Not one member of his party was elected to parliament.

The United States again protested Nour’s imprisonment. But his battered loyalists considered the American effort as much a cause for concern as for hope. Ideologically, they were skeptical of the sincerity of America’s demands for democracy in Arab countries, and politically they were well aware that the perception of a close connection between them and the Bush administration would severely harm their popularity. Yet without unflinching American pressure, the liberal opposition in Egypt has no chance of surviving, either.

However, such pressure has not been forthcoming. This has not been unnoticed by the advocates of democratization in the Middle East. “It was expected that Mubarak, once re-elected, would allow further liberalization,” wrote the American Enterprise Institute’s Joshua Muravchik in a *Washington Post* op-ed.

Instead, 2006 has brought a wave of repression and brutality that goes beyond the jailing of Nour. The regime’s goons have bloodied and arrested peaceful protesters doing nothing more than expressing solidarity with the dignified protests of Egypt’s judges.... In response to these abuses, U.S. press spokesmen have issued formulaic criticisms, and Nour’s conviction on patently bogus charges led Washington to postpone trade talks. But the mild tone of U.S. protests, the low level at which most have been delivered, and the admixture of warm gestures toward the regime—such as the meetings Vice President Cheney and other top officials held with Mubarak’s son and hoped-for heir, Gamal, last month—have combined to create the impression that the Bush administration has begun to pull its punches on Middle East democracy.²⁴

The problem of Arab liberalizers' simultaneously needing external American support and being internally harmed by it is endemic to the region, and liberalizers' prospects are further imperiled by the shifting concern for their fortunes shown by the United States. In the winter of 2005, the Syrian democratic movement, established four years earlier when Bashar al-Assad took power, was revived. The movement exposed the latent power of the liberalism in Syria: In its prime, 1,000 intellectuals, businessmen, and professionals signed a petition demanding that the regime recognize democracy as "a universal system of values," respect freedom of expression and assembly, and hold free parliamentary elections. After a brief period of inaction, Assad decided to nip the democratic awakening in the bud, sentencing its leaders to five years in prison.

In fact, it was only after the assassination by Syria of Rafiq al-Hariri, the former prime minister of Lebanon, that Western pressure forced Assad to pardon the movement's leaders and allow the party to rebuild. Convinced that Assad would not harm them with the eyes of the world upon him, they renewed their call for democratization and worked to expand their base. Yet once again, the role of the West was both a blessing and a curse: Western pressure on Assad was the sole guarantee that the democratic movement would not be suppressed, but such pressure enabled the Syrian government to cast the opposition as a pro-Western movement. It was no coincidence that the Syrian liberals conspicuously renounced any connection with the United States.²⁵

This, then, is the situation that now confronts the Arab world: The war in Iraq and America's liberalization initiatives have put the question of democracy at the top of the agenda. But the new Western presence also engenders fears of a revival of the days of imperialism and subjugation. Without the West's involvement, Arab democracy is impossible, but with the West's involvement, a massive psychological and political stumbling block to the establishment of Arab democracy is created. How is either side to escape from this impasse?

The public debate in the United States surrounding the future of Bush's plans currently oscillates between two approaches. According to the first, the administration plays up false or temporary accomplishments and insists that the Middle East's road to democratization is being paved—even if it does still remain a long one. The second, espoused by the war's opponents, calls for an immediate withdrawal of Western armies from Iraq and the abandonment of all aspirations to “impose” foreign regimes and worldviews on the Arab world. Adherence to either of these views is likely to lead to the same result: The defeat of the Western project in Iraq, the repeal of hopes for liberalism in the Arab world, and a serious erosion of America's strategic and moral standing in both the Middle East and the world at large.

Clearly, the United States must adopt a new doctrine, one that attempts to sever the connection in the Arab mind between democracy and the promotion of Western power. First, this doctrine must acknowledge the necessity of maintaining American forces on Iraqi soil, since a hasty withdrawal is liable to tip an already unstable situation toward wide-scale anarchy. Moreover, such a move will certainly be interpreted in the Arab world as proof not only of the West's weakness, but also of the weakness of liberalism itself. Second, this doctrine should incorporate two new principles into its previously stated commitment to Iraq: One, a reduction in the contingency between potential outcomes of the democratization process in Arab societies and the condition of the American economy; and two, the universality of American standards in the field of human rights. Whereas the first principle will afford the United States more room for political maneuvering—and, in time, rid it of the suspicion prevalent in the Arab world that its true goals are imperialistic—the second principle will lend its foreign policy the credibility it currently lacks and help those Arab liberals who oppose their regime obtain the legitimacy denied to them today. Indeed, one of the main difficulties that today's Arab

freedom fighters face is the suspicion that they are lackeys of the West. So long as America continues to discriminate between liberals, advocates of the pan-Arab idea, and Islamist activists, then democratic leaders like Riyadh Seif in Syria, whose commitment to liberalism has withstood over four years of incarceration, will not gain the support of his own people.

The new doctrine will have to address the political problems related to the oil economy. American dependency on Arab oil must be reduced, and this reduction must be linked to the question of democratization. Today the United States has no exculpatory answer to the accusation that its true interest is ensuring the continued supply of oil from the Persian Gulf, and nurtures regimes that prove accommodating on this point. The United States ignores human-rights violations in the Gulf emirates while reproaching Syria for similar violations in its territory. It warns Damascus of the consequences of its involvement in terrorism, but tiptoes around the proven connection between the Wahhabi establishment and the insurgency in Iraq. So long as the West depends so heavily on Middle East oil, there will be no easy answer to the charge that America's only priority in the region is advancing its economic interests.

Another issue the new doctrine must address is the Arab belief that democracy promotion is an excuse by the United States to remove from power rulers who are not to its liking and replace them with ones who are. In truth, this accusation cannot be dismissed as pure propaganda, since the administration went to war against Iraqi tyranny but contented itself with generalized declarations in favor of reform in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. "What is the moral difference between Baghdad and Riyadh?" Arab intellectuals ask. When they do not receive a reasonable answer, they doubt the sincerity of the democratization initiative as a whole.

America must therefore set consistent standards for the implementation of diplomatic and commercial sanctions on Arab regimes guilty of human rights violations. Consistent standards will have the double effect of forcing Arab regimes to ease their grip on society while convincing these regimes' opponents that they are not alone in their struggle for reform.

Of course, the United States cannot be expected to act indiscriminately against every Arab country whose progress toward democracy is unsatisfactory. American foreign policy cannot afford to neglect its immediate interests and other commitments, among them its commitment to the welfare of Israel. In the context of its new doctrine, however, the administration will be required to clarify why certain undemocratic Arab regimes receive preferential treatment. It could point to realistic considerations about the limitations of its power, for example, or the fact that it is easier to influence in friendly ways regimes that are not openly hostile. In any event, America can no longer make do with prettified explanations for its behavior.

The universalization of standards in the field of human rights will force the United States to be more evenhanded in its attitude toward alleged processes of reforms, the real purpose of which is to *prevent* the possibility of democratization. In the past decade and a half, many Arab regimes sympathetic to the United States announced reforms viewed by Westerners as historical revolutions. In reality, such regimes were merely paying lip service to American demands, offering empty gestures that only reinforced the rulers' political power. The case of Bahrain is a typical example: Hamad Al Khalifa, the emirate's relatively young, Western-educated king, introduced upon his ascendance to the throne in 1999 a series of reforms that amended the constitution, revitalized parliament, and guaranteed individual liberties. Bahrainis were promised "a new dawn of democracy," and the West was only too eager to offer praise. Yet in the end, the king's authority over the entire system of government, including parliament, remained unrestricted, and the promise of democratic progress never materialized.²⁶ Time after time, American administrations were hoodwinked by empty reforms: Parliaments with no real authority to legislate; constitutions whose stated protection of freedom of speech is nothing but a slogan; television stations that may discuss every taboo, but never mention the royal family's name. Not surprisingly, the United States became a laughingstock to those who supported real reform in the Arab world.

By far the most crucial adjustment the new doctrine must make, however, is the unequivocal public acknowledgment of the possibility that free elections may bring to power forces antagonistic to the West. Without such an acknowledgment, the Arab world will never take the American democratization initiative at face value. Referring to the war in Iraq, many Arab intellectuals have expressed the concern that if the United States has to choose between a tyranny led by a pro-Western leader or an Islamic democracy, it will choose the former. This view is based, for example, on events in Algeria in the early 1990s: The Algerian government cancelled the parliamentary elections in which a victory by the militant Islamic Salvation Front was imminent, with tacit American approval.

Were most Arab countries to hold free elections, Islamist parties would consistently win the majority of votes. This is the expected outcome in both Egypt and Jordan, should free elections be held, and in Syria the Muslim Brotherhood would almost certainly become the largest party, even if it did not win an absolute majority.

The reason for Arab society's widespread sympathy for Islamic movements is connected to religious radicalization in Arab society, but only partly. Equally important is the fact that Islamic movements are often the most organized, and are adept at homing in on the feelings of a public that is exasperated with the existing order. At the same time, they act as a conservative-purist option, standing for family values, community strength, and national honor; as a social option that promises to help the weak; as a "clean" option that swears to root out corruption and nepotism; and as a xenophobic option that attracts those who feel humiliated by their low social position. While it is true that many opposition movements in the West sell themselves on similar platforms, it is rare for any one political party to appeal to so many elements of society as do the Islamic movements in the Arab world.

The Muslim Brotherhood, the largest and most powerful of the Islamic movements, is actually in favor of free elections and the establishment of a parliament. Yet the democracy envisioned by the Muslim Brotherhood is far from liberal; in its view, an assembly of elected representatives cannot act

outside the rules set by Allah, and their sole duty is to interpret his behest. Sovereignty, according to this form of “democracy,” is not in the hands of the people, but in Allah’s hands, and party-political activity is condemned as divisive. This is a classic example of conditional democracy: The Muslim Brotherhood is willing to participate in democratic elections in order to win, but once victorious will not hesitate to dismantle the system that brought it to power.²⁷

Of course, the West cannot treat the possibility of negative outcomes casually. Rather, it must weigh the probability of success against the risk and may also take comfort in the fact that Islamic movements will not participate in a democratization process that takes place in a vacuum. If the doctrine proposed here is implemented, once these Islamic movements have come to power, they will confront a Western policy that does not tolerate the violation of human rights and enjoys an increasing amount of Arab and international legitimacy. At the same time, these Islamic movements will have to cope with local political opponents who enjoy a growing popularity in their communities. Of course, there will be those Islamic movements, in spite of internal resistance and international sanctions, that manage to use the democratic process in order to undermine it. However, there is also the possibility that in some Arab countries, Islamic movements will take part in pluralistic political campaigns, represent the most conservative position, and halfheartedly reconcile themselves to legislation that is not to their liking. Both outcomes are likely, and one does not exclude the other. Indeed, democratic reform in the Middle East will not be considered trustworthy if it gives rise solely to pro-Western leaders.

What should be done when an Islamist party is elected? A recent example is Hamas’ victory in the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections. The U.S. should on the one hand acknowledge the democratic legitimacy of the new government and on the other make it clear that, first, it will relinquish such acknowledgment should the new government attempt to dismantle the very democratic means that brought it to power, and, second, reiterate that it reserves the right to protect itself from regimes that threaten

its security, regardless of whether they are democratically elected. The U.S. stance of both endorsing the Palestinians' right to choose their leaders and refusing to supply the elected terrorist organization with foreign aid was the right one, but it was done, like all U.S. democratization policy in the region, as a reaction to the particular situation, rather than as the impartial implementation of a larger policy.

In the end, political reform cannot be viewed as an insurance policy taken out by the West against the possibility of democracy sustaining some blows. Liberal reform may bring to power irresponsible regimes. It may even bring to power tyrants worse than the previous ones. But if we take the long view, we must conclude that regional processes of democratization, despite the inevitable setbacks, can only contribute to the struggle against fanaticism and violence.

In the final analysis, the American doctrine whose lines were sketched out here will gain credibility only if it is portrayed *as* a doctrine—that is, not as a series of unconnected actions, but rather as a long-term and binding concept. By presenting it in this way, America will admit its past mistakes and renounce its past errors—a move that will reflect great moral strength, not weakness. Particularly in the eyes of the Arab world, which considers America too arrogant, too patronizing, and too hypocritical, America's new stance will likely be greeted as refreshing news, and may have the added benefit of liberating latent liberal forces. True, there will always be those who see in this doctrine yet another Western imperialist plot. But given time, it is possible that bold and direct American policy might go some distance toward dispelling that ingrained suspicion.

Opponents of the war in Iraq who call for an admission of failure and retreat perpetuate the concept of Arab “uniqueness,” or the idea that there is something inherent in Arab societies that requires both their inhabitants and the West to accept the illiberal character of their regimes. Yet if they insist on resigning themselves to an anti-democratic, “Islamic civilization,”

what do they make of the fact that Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, has had a stable democracy since 1998, in which multiple Islamic parties participate?²⁸ Often these are the same people who point to the lack of a successful democratic tradition in Arab countries, yet ignore the fact that other countries with an authoritarian heritage, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, have nonetheless adopted the democratic form of government with great success. So, too, do they ignore the fact that when Arab societies in different periods were granted the opportunity to participate in free elections, they embraced them. Finally, they may point to the economic hardship suffered by some Arab countries as the reason for democracy's failure to thrive on their soil, although democratic regimes have risen to power in poor countries just as often as in wealthy ones. In sum, since the global democratic revolution began several decades ago, it has crossed cultures, religions, and economies. If there is one lesson that scholars of democracy have learned, it is that the primary conditions for this form of regime to prosper are external incentives and an internal elite determined to make it work.

President Bush was right, therefore, when he stated that there is nothing unique in the Arab world that prevents it from becoming democratic. He was also right when he insisted that there is no reason why Arab countries should be any different from Japan and Germany, the Latin American republics, the countries of the former Soviet bloc, and the tigers of Southeast Asia, most of whom exchanged tyranny for democracy. His mistake lies in ignoring one phenomenon that *is* unique to the Arab world—the dominance of a mindset that combines a desire for democracy with a genuine, cross-party fear of Western intentions.²⁹ It is possible that to untangle this Gordian knot, America must persist in wielding its sword. Yet the sword alone will never be enough.

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Notes

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1. The arguments against President Bush's exploits are not confined merely to leftist groups in America and Europe that were opposed to the war in Iraq and the American democratization initiatives from the outset (usually on the basis of the belief that these were ill-judged imperialist campaigns designed to serve the interests of the oil industry and the defense contractors in the United States). The Bush doctrine came under attack by intellectuals, journalists, and retired government officials of the realist school, as well. This group was not convinced of the logic of the president's strategy, describing it as unsystematic, and warning that the struggle to democratize the Middle East was liable to plunge the region into chaos. Zbigniew Brzezinski, formerly President Carter's national security adviser, cautioned that imposed democracy was liable to lead to undesirable results, and warned that in free elections in Saudi Arabia, Osama Bin Laden could well defeat King Abdullah; F. Gregory Gause III, director of the University of Vermont's Middle East Studies Program, concluded that the democratization of the Middle East could, contrary to George Bush's declared view, increase terror in the region; and Eric Margolis, a Canadian newspaper columnist, likened the American administration to a bull in a china shop with no real interest in democratization, but concerned rather with the ascendancy of more sympathetic and less despotic regimes, and then only if they served American interests. Margolis estimated that the main problem with Bush's democratization program was the fact that Osama Bin Laden was the most popular figure in the Arab world. See Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Wrong Way to Sell Democracy to the Arab World," *New York Times*, March 8, 2004, p. A19; F. Gregory Gause III, "Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?" *Foreign Affairs* 84:5 (September-October 2005), pp. 62-86; Eric Margolis, "Arab Democracy Just an Illusion?" *Toronto Sun*, March 13, 2005.

2. This view forms the basis for the explanations offered by several senior Orientalists for the lack of democracy in the Middle East. See, for example, Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*, second ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1994).

3. According to this view, which has informed Egyptian historiography, the meeting of the Egyptian *ulama* (religious scholars) was the first landmark in Egypt's recognition of political rights, and the establishment of the consultative council was the second. This view can obviously be used to present democratic development in Egypt as isolated from exclusively British influence on the one hand, and more sustained and constant than it is customarily described on the other. On this subject, see Yunan Labib Rizk, "Constitutional Reflections," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, October 17-23, 2002.

4. See the discussion of the evolution of the word *Shura* in modern Arab writing in Ami Ayalon, *Language and Change in the Arab Middle East: The Evolution of Modern Political Discourse* (New York: Oxford, 1987), pp. 110-126.

5. Faisal Ahmad Othman al-Haidar, *Documents of the Democratic and Political Movement in Kuwait from 1921 Until 1992* (Kuwait: That al-Salasel, 1995), pp. 9-12 [Arabic]; John E. Peterson, *The Arab Gulf States: Steps Towards Political Participation* (New York: Praeger, 1988), p. 29.

6. Fuad Hamza, *Saudi Arabia* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Nasr al-Haditha, 1968), pp. 98-101 [Arabic].

7. On this concept in Nasserist ideology, see Gamal Abd al-Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (Buffalo: Smith, Keynes & Marshall, 1959), pp. 36-37, 43-44; see also Nasser's speech of July 22, 1959 to mark the seventh anniversary of the revolution, as quoted in Gamal Abd al-Nasser, "The Way of the Struggle," in *This Is Our Way* (Cairo: 1961), pp. 34-74 [Arabic]. During the 1940s and 1950s the Baath party operated in Syria as a parliamentary movement in every way. Its constitution determined that the nation was sovereign and the source of the government's authority, and that the shape of any future government would be "parliamentary and constitutional" (*nizam niabi dusturi*), in which "the Executive Authority is responsible before the Legislative Authority, which is directly elected by the people." The promise by the Baath to bring about a revolution in both the consciousness of the Arab nation and its political structure was bound up with the promise that this revolution be a democratic one—that is to say, by winning a majority in parliament. The declaration of intentions written at the request of the party's founder, Michel Aflak, made it clear that the Baath would take power only when it could achieve its objectives, and that "this will not happen unless the party wins a majority of seats in parliament." See the fifth paragraph of the general principles in the Baath Constitution and clause 14 in "The Internal Policy of the Party," as it was printed in the Arab socialist Baath party's Constitution. *The Struggle of the Baath for Unity, Freedom and Socialism* (Beirut: Dar al-Talia, 1963), pp. 174-175, 176 [Arabic] or in English at www.baath-party.org/eng/constitution.htm; see also the document of Baath principles by Abdullah Abd al-Dayim and Shaker Mustapha in Zuhair Mardini, *The Teacher: The Story of Michel Aflak* (London: Riad al-Rayyes, 1988), pp. 349-355 [Arabic]; for the clause cited, see p. 355.

8. For example, in Bahrain in 1975, the Emir Sheikh Isa Ibn Salman Al Khalifa dissolved a parliament that had been elected under the constitution two years earlier. He imprisoned opponents of the regime and suspended the clause in the constitution that made it necessary to hold new elections. One year later, the emir of Kuwait Jabir al-Ahmed Al Sabah dissolved the parliament that had been elected under the constitution adopted in 1962, and suspended the constitutional clauses that required the consent of the assembly to changes in the constitution and forbade its suspension except during a state of emergency. See Rosmarie Said

Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf State: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 49-54; Peterson, *Arab Gulf States*, p. 39.

9. For a discussion of the objectives of American foreign policy after World War II, see Bernard Reich, "United States Interests in the Middle East," in Haim Shaked and Itamar Rabinovich, eds., *The Middle East and the United States: Perceptions and Policies* (New Brunswick, N.J. : Transaction Books, 1980), pp. 53-92.

10. Wahid Abd al-Majid, head of the Cairo extension of the Center for Arab Unity Studies (an independent research center of nationalist intellectuals based in Beirut and the most open forum in the Arab world for discussions on democracy), argued at a conference held in the Egyptian capital in April 1990 under the title "The Future of Democracy in the Arab Homeland," that as a result of events in Eastern Europe, adherents of the view that there are different models of democracy lack the most convincing proof of this claim, because the nations that overthrew the Leninist-Marxist regimes wanted only the Western model of democracy. Wahid Abd al-Majid, "On the Future of Democracy in the Arab Homeland (background document)," *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi* 138 (August 1990), pp. 80, 86-92. Another prominent spokesman for this view is Ismail Sabri Abdallah, Nasser's minister of planning and, in the 1960s and 1970s, one of the foremost voices for the establishment of a social democracy before a political democracy. In a lecture he delivered in London in May 1990, he argued that Arab societies no longer have to wait for certain conditions to be created in order to switch to democracy, because "democracy is not a gift that will be granted one of these days; it is achieved through struggle, and as a result of the struggle, which is sometimes violent and sometimes conciliatory." Moreover, he insisted that democracy "always requires the presence of an internal strength in society that will protect it until it becomes a general demand that people are willing to rebel for." The lecture was published as an article in *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi*. See Ismail Sabri Abdallah, "The Future of Democracy in the Arab Homeland," *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi* 137 (July 1990), p. 9.

11. Turki Abdullah al-Sudairi, "An Exceptional Democracy," *Al-Riyadh*, August 23, 1989.

12. For example, the editor of the culture section of the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Nahar*, Elias Khouri, claimed that the real reason for the Gulf War was not to be found in the invasion of Kuwait, for when, he asked, did the United States ever wage a war of liberation? In his view, to understand the causes of the war you have to return to the two central pillars of imperialistic behavior, which have remained unchanged since the nineteenth century: The first is the desire to prevent Arabs from creating a strong army, and the second is the desire to thwart Arab unity, born of the belief that a fragmented Arab nation will not be able to realize the potential of its national resources, or create a modern culture. Similarly, Burhan Ghalioun, a Syrian lecturer in political science at the Sorbonne (and future head of its Center

for Studies of the Contemporary Middle East) concluded that the real cause of the Gulf War was not the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, but American and European hostility towards Arabs—a hostility that is greater than the West’s hostility towards any other nation, and arising *inter alia* from the competition between their two distinct cultures and the recognition that Islam is the strongest power opposing Western hegemony in the post-Soviet era. See Elias Khouri, “Independence and Democracy,” in Ahmad Sidqi al-Dajani, ed., *The Gulf Crisis and Its Implementations on the Arab Homeland*, second ed. (Beirut: Marcaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-Arabiyya, 1997), pp. 39-40 [Arabic]; Burhan Ghalioun, “The Gulf War and the Strategic Conflict in the Arab Area,” in *Gulf Crisis*, pp. 17-20.

13. For example, the Syrian intellectual Abdullah Abd al-Dayim, who resides in France, wrote that in spite of the liberal pretensions of the West and “its false claim concerning the values of the liberal-democrat, international civilization,” what really interested him was the seizure of the natural wealth of the southern world, which includes the Arab world. Similarly, the international relations researcher at the American University of Beirut, Nasif Yusuf Hata, argued that the West’s victory over communism “is in no way ‘the end of history’ as Fukuyama had described it,” because this victory is no more than a partial achievement over a value system that belongs to the same utilitarian philosophical framework whose origin is in Europe. See Abdullah Abd al-Dayim, “The Arab Nationalism and the New World Order,” *Shu’un Arabiyya* 69 (March 1992), pp. 22-34; Nasif Yusuf Hata, “Changes in the World Order and the New State of Mind and Its Reflections on the Regional Arab Order,” *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi* 165 (March 1992), pp. 29-44.

14. For the complete text of the interview, see *Ukaz*, March 29, 1992.

15. For the complete text of the interview, see *Tishrin*, March 13, 1992.

16. Bin Laden’s movement is neither “post-modern” nor “amorphous,” as some commentators have taken to describing it. Throughout the 1990s, Bin Laden gave voice to a desire that resonated among the Saudi religious youth and that became, in the wake of the invitation of American troops to Saudi Arabia in August 1990, cause for a mass protest movement—the desire to drive out all American forces from the Arabian Peninsula in particular and from Muslim lands in general. The difference between Bin Laden and his counterparts in the Saudi opposition was his determination to give armed expression to this idea, a determination inspired by the ideas of Abdallah Azam, the Palestinian leader of the jihad movement in Afghanistan who was killed in 1989. Bin Laden was expelled from Saudi Arabia to the Sudan in 1991, and there, thanks to his family wealth and the links he had forged during the time he spent with the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, he began to establish a terrorist network intended to drive out the West from the Middle East. This network’s purpose was best articulated in the World Islamic Front declaration of “Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders” drafted under Bin Laden’s leadership in February 1998. The declaration stated that the American presence on Saudi

territory, in the Gulf, and in Iraq was “a clear declaration of war on Allah, his messenger, and Muslims,” and therefore every Muslim is obliged to “kill the Americans and their allies, civilians and military” anywhere they can. For a draft of the declaration see *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, February 23, 1998; www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/98022-fatwa.htm. For a concise discussion of the development of the Bin Laden movement and its ideology see Uriya Shavit, “Al-Qaida’s Saudi Roots,” *Middle East Quarterly* 13:4 (2006), pp. 3-13; Joshua Teitelbaum, “Osama Bin Laden: The Saudi Background,” in Esther Webman, ed., *In the Wake of September 11: Islam and the West—Clash or Coexistence* (Tel Aviv: Dayan Center, 2002), pp. 43-48 [Hebrew]; Esther Webman, *The Writing That Was on the Wall: Osama Bin Laden The Man and His Deeds* (Tel Aviv: Dayan Center, 2002) [Hebrew].

17. The belief that the neo-conservatives acted as the political planners of the current American administration—among other reasons, because they succeeded in setting out a clear view concerning the Middle East in the wake of the September 11 attacks, when the administration was in need of just such a view—is held in common by both neo-conservative thinkers and their most bitter opponents. See Joshua Muravchik, “The Neo-Conservative Cabal,” *Commentary* 116 (September 2003), pp. 26-33; Stephan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2004), pp. 112-156.

18. For an analysis of President Bush’s speeches in which the principles of this doctrine were set out (on the eve of the second Gulf War and after it), see www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030226-11.html; www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/26019.htm.

19. In the same vein, Egyptian writer Hussein Ahmad Amin argued in an article he published in the journal of the Arab League, *Shu’un Arabiyya*, that America went to war to bring down Saddam Hussein after the failure of its previous attempts to secure complete and unshakeable hegemony in the world, *inter alia* through global institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and to rule it “economically, politically, and culturally.” The war in Iraq is no different, in his view, from the conquests of Alexander the Great; the only difference is that Alexander the Great did not discuss the rights of man when he set forth to expand the area of his rule. See Hussein Ahmad Amin, “The Place of Democracy in the American War Against Iraq,” *Shu’un Arabiyya* 113 (Spring 2003), pp. 55-67.

20. Khair al-Din Hasib, “The Probable Forecasts in Iraq,” *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi* 307 (September 2004), pp. 6-30.

21. Turki al-Hamad, “Walking in a Minefield,” *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 7, 2004.

22. See, for example, Mubarak’s speech at the opening of the conference on “Arab Reform: Vision and Implementation,” held in Alexandria on March 12, 2004. Mubarak stated that democratic reform had to be based on “agreement and

harmony between Arab governments and their people” and that “all Arab countries were making enormous efforts to achieve structural and organizational reforms in all areas of political, economic, and social life within the framework required to achieve a delicate balance between the positive and negative effects of reform, taking into account the variety of cultural, religious, and demographic sensitivities of each society and the need not to upset its stability.” See “Mubarak Stresses That the Arab World Begins a New Stage,” *Al-Ahram*, March 13, 2004. See also an article by Ahmad Salim al-Bursan in the *Al-Ahram* journal on strategic studies according to which the objective of the “Greater Middle East” plan presented at the conference of industrialized nations was to break down the Arab cultural structure and alter the social framework of the countries in the region in a way that would serve American interests. Ahmad Salim al-Bursan, “The Greater Middle East Initiative: The Political and Strategic Dimensions,” *Al-Siyasa al-Dawliyya* 158 (October 2004), pp. 42-47; in addition, Khaled Daoud published a series of articles of unusual scope in *Al-Ahram*, in which he analyzed Natan Sharansky’s book *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), and explained that the declaration by the United States president that this book reflected the DNA of his presidency showed that he had adopted a hypocritical and unbalanced policy that purports to promote democracy in the Middle East, but in fact serves Zionist interests. *Al-Ahram*, February 15, 2005; February 16, 2005; February 17, 2005; February 22, 2005; February 28, 2005; March 1, 2005. One commentary published in *Al-Ahram* even described Mubarak’s decision to hold multi-party elections as an act that attested to the president’s great accomplishments, which in turn made it unnecessary to choose any other candidate: Hatem Sidqi, “Therefore... I Will Not Elect Mubarak,” *Al-Ahram*, August 30, 2005.

23. Voter turnout was particularly low, considering that the government employed all its resources to draw its faithful to the polling stations. In fact, it could even be said that the vast majority of the Egyptian public chose to boycott the elections, or simply ignored them.

24. Joshua Muravchik, “A Democracy Policy in Ashes,” *Washington Post*, June 27, 2006.

25. For an analysis of the rise and fall of the “Damascus Spring,” see Uriya Shavit, *A Dawn of an Old Era: The Imaginary Revolution in the Middle East* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2003), pp. 193-214 [Hebrew]. For an interview with and profile of the leader of the Syrian liberal opposition movement, Riyadh Seif, see Lina Sinjab, “Seif’s Release Renews Hope for a Damascus Spring,” *The Daily Star*, January 23, 2006.

26. Shavit, *Dawn of an Old Era*, pp. 164-189.

27. For a discussion of the establishment and political doctrine of the Muslim Brotherhood, see Haidar Ibrahim Ali, *The Islamic Streams and the Democratic Issue* (Beirut: Marcaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-Arabiyya, 1996), pp. 54-65, 164-166,

193-210 [Arabic]; for the opinion of the movement's founder, Hassan al-Bana, on the necessity of revitalizing the rule of Islam and repelling the West, see Hassan al-Bana, "The Tendency of the New Revival in the Islamic World Toward Islam," in *Toward a Muslim Generation: The Fundamentals of Islam and the Social Order* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Islami lil-Dirasat wal-Buhuth, 1991), pp. 5-12 [Arabic].

28. It is interesting to note that the success (at least for the present) of the democratic revolution in Indonesia is scarcely referred to in writings about the future of democracy in the Middle East. Parties that identify themselves as Muslim have been part of the democratic process in Indonesia for the last eight years; both their ascension to power and their relinquishing of it are remarkable for a country that has (like all Arab countries) no robust democratic tradition. The Indonesian experience may provide proof that a reliable democratization process, including systems of checks and balances and supported by vigorous (but non-violent) pressure to preserve and promote it, may successfully integrate Islamic movements. It is possible, of course, to point to differences between the Indonesian political Islam and the Arab one; but even these differences simply demonstrate that "Islam" is not a monolithic, meta-historical entity.

29. Drawing a connection between adopting the Western form of government and surrendering to Western values is not only the work of the Arab world. Such arguments were prevalent in the past and, to some extent, still are in the Iberian and Southeast Asian countries. The fundamental difference is that it is difficult to find Spaniards or Singaporeans who truly believe that the West is desirous—or capable—of ruling their countries by force and enslaving them to its own interests. On the other hand, the fear of democratic imperialism is common to many groups in the Arab world. This fear has become even more profound following the war in Iraq. Hence the Gordian knot discussed in this article, which is indeed, at least in this form, unique to the Arabs.