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The dialectics of Arab state reform

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The modern Arab states of the Middle East are remnants of the Ottoman (Turkish) and Safavid (Persian) dominions, the last of the great Muslim empires. These countries not only share common religious and historical legacies but have also experienced very similar colonial and postcolonial influences.

In contrast to the relatively effective constitutional regimes of Iran and Turkey, the Arab States are ruled by either monarchies or military dictators. It is, however, important to note that the regions' dictatorships are a result of the social and political processes of the twentieth century. The Arab defeat at the hands of Israel in the 1967 war and the changing structure of global politics due to Cold War competition were the main factors responsible for the polarisation of the Arab states and the tempering of Arab nationalist sentiments that were so strongly evoked by the Egyptian leader Jamal 'Abd al-Nasser , especially between 1953 and 1967.

This article aims to bring clarity to the current challenges facing Arab political development by outlining its major historical tropes, thereby revealing the contested nature of Arab reformist discourse. On the basis of the broad historical survey undertaken, it is argued that Islamism, which enjoys immense grassroots support in the contemporary political context, will have to weather the extreme pressures of foreign interference if it is to fare any better than earlier home-grown ideologies like Nasserism and Ba'thism (see below).

The roots of Arab development

By 1945, the massive influx of wealth into the Arab states, primarily due to oil revenues, served as the single impetus for development, especially in terms of infrastructure and nation building. However, progress was undermined by defeat in the first Arab-Israeli war from 1948 to 1949, as well as the failure to cope with internal political, economic and social pressures. The resultant backlash brought about a series of military coups: in Syria in 1949, Egypt in 1952, Sudan and Iraq in 1958, North Yemen in 1962, and Libya in 1969. The remaining countries, including Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States, were all monarchies and effectively one-party states. The only exception was Lebanon, where the existence of parliamentary or party politics has been essential in order to balance the interests of both Christians and Muslims.

The sharp rise in oil prices in the early 1970s led to ambitious programmes of social and economic development, and even had a positive impact upon the non-oil producing states like Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, which were able to benefit from the new wealth through workers' remittances and financial aid. In the 1950s and 1960s, the military was seen as an instrument of modernisation and change, but by the 1970s this image

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was severely damaged largely due to defeats on the battlefield and failed agrarian and industrialisation reform policies.

Indigenous ideologies – Nasserism and Ba'thism

The two major homegrown ideologies up to this point were undoubtedly Nasserism and Ba'thism, impacting most significantly upon Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Egypt under Nasser embodied the aspirations of the Arab world; facing a future freed of the imperial past, newly independent, and equally assertive. From the time of the free officers' coup in 1952 to the Arab-Israeli war in June 1967 Nasser was seen as a dynamic president who had set in motion a positive process of national transformation that engaged in the construction of a new society, oriented toward an optimistic Arab future. As a result, Egypt exercised profound regional influence in this period and Nasser came to embody progressive reformism to such an extent that his initiatives were copied in other Arab states and referred to as Nasserism.

However, Nasserism as a doctrine, tried to satisfy too many conflicting aspirations. As such, it was unable to position itself as religious or secular, democratic or authoritarian, socialist or capitalist. It contained aspects of all but faltered in not privileging any one of these as the most important. The defeat in 1967, therefore, marked the true end of Nasserism. Hereafter, Nasser allowed the Soviet Union to acquire dominant influence in the military, he dropped the quest for Arab unity, and the hopes he had raised were finally shattered with his death in 1970. His successor, Anwar Sadat (1918–1981) was left to fill the void.

Although lacking the charisma of Nasser, Sadat was able to reorient Egyptian domestic and foreign policy in ways that were every bit as profound as Nasser's. He realigned Egypt's relations with the superpowers in favour of the United States by expelling Soviet military advisors and by courting peace with Israel; but not before redeeming Egyptian honour by defeating the Israelis in the October 1973 war. However, Sadat's US brokered treaty with Israel earned him the discontent of militant Islamic groups in Egypt and his clampdown on these groups ultimately led to his assassination on 6 October 1981.

Ba'thism, in contrast to Nasserism, was characterised by a much more sharply defined set of principles. The Ba'th party was founded by two Syrians, Michel Aflaq (a Christian) and Salah al-Din Bitar (a Muslim), both critical thinkers seized with issues of development in the Arab world. Aflaq defined the party's role in stirring and romantic language. In their student days in Paris, both became intensely interested in issues of Arab reformism. They conceived the party as an instrument of social justice and saw it as becoming the vanguard of Arab unity. It, therefore, attracted young Arabs of the post-independence era who were eager to restore Arab dignity, especially in Syria and Iraq.

Aflaq was, however, in no way comparable to Nasser in terms of leadership qualities. Lacking a politician of ability to implement its vision the party's plans were thwarted as it split into regional groupings and quarreling factions. Ambitious men like Syria's Hafez al-Asad and Iraq's Saddam Hussein used the party's apparatus and ideology to serve their own ends. In the hands of al-Asad and Hussein, the Ba'th Party became a means of survival for their respective regimes and they used it as an effective instrument of control and indoctrination.

As such, the party lost its pan-Arab mission and developed rival Syrian and Iraqi branches. Common to both, however, was severe political repression, although social reforms were in some instances significant. Syria still remains an authoritarian dictatorship under Bashar al-Asad, Hafez al-Asad's son and heir, whereas the political future of Iraq after the US led overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April 2003 remains to be determined.

Islamism and democracy – future imperfect?

In the 1980s, the biggest challenge that faced the Arab regimes was the re-emergence of Islamism or Islamic reformism, which was in no small measure influenced by the Islamic revolution in Iran. The Islamic reform movements were largely unsuccessful due to the foreign support offered to the various regimes in order to protect their own interests. A striking example is the overthrow of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria by the military after a landslide victory in the first round of parliamentary elections held in December 1991. Voters had rejected the National Liberation Front that had ruled the country as a single party for 30 years. The Islamic Salvation Front was poised to gain a decisive parliamentary majority, but the

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military intervened, declaring the elections null and void. A notable exception, however, was the successful establishment of an Islamic regime in Sudan in 1989.

Apart from militarism, which is vested in the hands of the ruling elites, the most prominent form of authority within the Arab world today is most certainly a strongly held religious conviction, rooted in the hearts of the people. This has guaranteed the sustained popularity of Islamist political parties. The global influence of liberal political values in traditional Arab societies has also entrenched the popularity of democracy. Consequently, the UN commissioned *Arab Human Development Report* of 2004 shows that the majority of citizens in the Arab world aspire towards political participation through the establishment of representative democratic processes. The irony is that democracy in the Arab world favours the Islamists due to their strong grassroots support bases.

Foreign intervention – the role of the United States

The United States currently exercises undisputed influence over the Middle East, and it is difficult to envisage the flourishing of any popular movement representative of the political aspirations and ambitions of the civilian populations in these countries. While the US led invasion of Iraq in April 2003 only signals the perpetuation of the old colonial paradigm of political, military, and economic domination, exposing the divide between the vested interests of a powerful centre and ultimate regional self-determination on the periphery, its recent posturing on the need to democratise the Middle East is cause for much greater concern. Such posturing signals the emergence of a far more nefarious trend: the nurturing of 'expedient democracies'.

This is borne out by the United States' heavy-handed policies towards countries with well-established systems of representative government, like Sudan and Iran, and its tolerance and open allegiance to repressive regimes like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia. While military invasion still remains the most blatant form of domination, it is by no means as perverse as interference in the democratic processes of sovereign states in order to protect the US's own vested interests. The US has welcomed farcical election outcomes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia as signs of progress. In contrast, it has openly sought to undermine the January 2006 victory of the Islamist Hamas Movement in Palestine in an election unanimously acknowledged by the international community as being free and fair. As such, third-party intervention still remains a major factor hindering positive reform and progress in the Arab States of the Middle East.

It can, therefore, be safely concluded that reform in the Arab world is likely to be highly contested and subject to much social upheaval in the coming years, especially with the curbing of natural political expression by extraordinary interventions from abroad. While Nasserism and Ba'thism have ultimately failed as champions of Arab reform, Islamism still remains relevant. Paradoxically, the US's virulent opposition to Islamism only increases its popularity. The single most disturbing trend emanating from the US's 'war on terror' has been the double standard by which reform in the Arab world has been promoted. Propping up of US friendly regimes has been given precedence over the political empowerment of civil society and the establishment of equal citizenship for all. In so doing, the dialogue *between* states has been emphasised over the dialogue *within* states. This trend is not easily reversed since the national interests of external power-brokers dictate the terms of engagement, thereby leaving the region disempowered. The only way to shift the balance of power is to appeal for interaction between state actors that invokes value-based paradigms of engagement over the predominant paradigm of narrow self interest. In this regard, developing an acute sense of historical consciousness is an indispensable first step.

Policy recommendations

The United Nations

- The UN must throw its weight behind the findings expressed in its *Arab Human Development Report 2004* by supporting reform initiatives that arise from civil society.
- The UN needs to take a strong position against externally imposed reform agendas for the Middle East that disenfranchise the citizens of the region and express no long term vision for peace.

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Arab League

- The League must urge its member states to engage rather than isolate home-grown reform initiatives.
- The League must encourage and facilitate dialogue between member states at the level of civil society.

South Africa

- By virtue of its unique history, South Africa should share its experience in conflict resolution and nation building with elements of Middle Eastern civil society.
- South Africa should exploit its position in forums like the UN, AU and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to encourage members to engage with reform in the Middle East, based on the principles of multilateralism and equal political participation for all.

Suggested readings

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