HICHAM ALAOUI

25 YEARS
25 IDEAS

A GENERATION TO CHANGE THE ARAB WORLD

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Contents

Preface

The genesis of my writing for Le Monde Diplomatique came in May 1994. Then, I met Dr. Ignacio Ramonet, the chief editor, at Princeton University. The setting was the inaugural conference of the Institute for the Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, and the focus was the clash of civilizations thesis advanced by Samuel Huntington. Our conversations against the backdrop of those intellectual debates motivated me to start drafting an essay about citizenship in the Arab world. I would submit that exposition the following year, and the rest is history.

The ideas advanced in these collected essays written since then are diverse. Some are anchored to specific moments in time and places. The article on Morocco from September 1996 came at a particular juncture in Moroccan political history. The article on religion and citizenship in the Middle East from October 2001 came after 9/11. It sought to isolate the cultural, historical, and political factors underlying the terrorist attacks, in an effort to avoid the pitfall of essentializing any purported civilizational clash between Muslims and the West. The article on the Tunisian revolution in February 2011 came at the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and captured the first democratic breakthrough of this momentous revolutionary wave.

The other articles pursued wider ideas. They reflected upon social, economic, political, and geostrategic changes rippling throughout the Middle East, and touched upon multiple countries. I observed

these changes intimately over the decades, as a practitioner of politics as well as an independent scholar.

The first such idea deconstructs the Orientalist trope that conflates the Middle East with perpetual despotism. Authoritarian rule in the region is not exceptional. Autocratic regimes abound in the region, but the nature of their authoritarian rule is not unique. Repression, cooptation, legitimation, and other tools of governance does not arise from any mysterious essence, nor are they permanently ingrained into political structures. The origins, configuration, and durability of all authoritarian states can be explained through objective social scientific analysis. For instance, as I wrote in April 2008, many Arab regimes were upgrading their model of autocracy, allowing for highly controlled forms of competition as a strategy for survival in the face of public frustration.

The second current concerns the nexus between Islam and democracy. Islam and democracy are not incompatible. Democracy may not be inexorable in the Middle East, because the breakdown of authoritarianism does not necessarily mean the imminence of democratization. Yet, the reality is that there is no fundamental schism between political freedoms on the one hand, and Islamic culture and faith on the other. Moreover, any democratic breakthrough in the region will require that Islamic actors, such as Islamists, have space carved out for them through party politics and social mobilization.

Overcoming the mistrust that often clouds relations between Islamists and secularists remains a momentous task. This is akin to the ideological divide in Latin America between Left and Right – though it is trickier, since the Islamist-secularist rift concerns not only philosophical ideals but also higher notions of divinity and faith. Long reflections on this intellectual puzzle gave rise to my doctoral research at Oxford University, culminating in my

dissertation defended in January 2020 entitled, "Reconciling Democratization and Secularization in the Middle East: Tunisia and Egypt in Comparative Perspective."

Yet, the state matters too for religion and politics. A common analytical tendency is to remove the state from understandings of how religious actors interface with political systems. Even in countries with intense Islamist contestation, the foremost religious actor is the state itself in how it broadcasts Salafi norms and conservative ideals. What results is a complex political game. By entering religious discourse, authoritarian leaders signal to Islamists that they can best guarantee their ideals. At the same time, they signal to secularists and progressives that only authoritarian state institutions can protect them from Islamist encroachment. Finally, it signals to a nervous West that only these states can control religion, and hold back the tides of radical Islamism.

The third general impulse concerns geostrategic conflict and the international arena, and how they factor into the regional equation. The articles pay close attention to how the boundaries between domestic politics and external affairs in the Middle East frequently blur, often driven by exogenous shocks and interventions. The 2003 Iraq War occupied a watershed moment, and restructured the regional terrain in terms of the balance of interests between Arab states and Iran, as well as the nature of sectarianism and popular movements. In turn, the retreat of American hegemony became a prevalent theme over the past decade, a period that has seen regional actors and states reassert themselves. The implication of this understanding is that it remains difficult to discuss the internal political affairs of many countries without referencing their regional and international milieu. What happens in one context deeply imprints upon the other.

The fourth common theme is Palestine, the struggle over which

has traditionally had an enormous role in Arab political discourse. Many of these essays exhibit skepticism about whether the Israeli government was committed to good-faith efforts to achieve a viable two-state solution after the Oslo accords, and whether the US could objectively sponsor this peace process.

Yet, these analyses also note that the Palestinian leadership also bears responsibility for its plight. Factionalism and rent-seeking are rife within the Palestinian government, an historical outcome of how the Palestinian national movement itself emerged and mobilized. The struggle for statehood goes hand-in-hand with the corollary struggle for national self-determination. Irrespective of Israeli intentions with the Oslo process, the latter struggle was meant to create new institutions that would give rise to political pluralism, which has not occurred under the watch of Palestinian ruling elites. The Palestinian problem, like so many other challenges in the Middle East, results from the convergence of disorienting forces flowing from multiple directions.

The fifth thread is one that weaves its way through over the past decade: the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring is not treated as a fluke event, but rather an historical process that is still unfolding. These uprisings not only were unavoidable given the unsustainability of authoritarian rule, but also remain ongoing in the current day. Sprinkled throughout the essays are comparisons between the Arab Spring and past historical waves of democratization and regional transformation. Also emphasized is the relentless effort by conservative actors to mount counterrevolutionary campaigns to reverse the political changes unleashed by these uprisings.

Yet, contentious protests continue to unfold in cycles over time, as the last several essays analyze. In 2019, we witnessed the return of national uprisings in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq, with Sudan now undergoing its own political transition as a result. Demonstra-

tions and rebellions persist in other countries in the Middle East, showing that the capacity of everyday people to resist political authority remains an integral part of the regional landscape.

All five of these ideas percolate throughout the corpus of writings presented here. In crafting them, I have come to regard Le Monde Diplomatique as an intellectual home, one that has allowed me to become not just a contributor but a collaborator. It was the forum through which I built my independence as not just an academic thinker, but also as a person. In a post-Cold War era of change and uncertainty in the Middle East, I am proud to see the journal maintain its global readership and continue to interrogate pressing issues of the day.

Being a Citizen in the Arab world

In the search of the rule of law

July 1995

There is not a single democratic regime, nor the rule of law, in the entire Arab world. This scandalous situation –at a time when democratization is advancing everywhere else in the world, including in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia– exasperates Arab public opinion. The latter, increasingly urbanized and better educated, is demanding a true status of citizenship that will enable ordinary people to more effectively fight against the neo-authoritarianism of their regimes and counter the excesses of Islamic obscurantism.

In Europe, the rise of the nation-state evolved in tandem with the transformation of the concept of citizenship. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, after a long struggle against despotism, subjects whose essential individual function was to obey transcendental power became "citizens," or full partners in a social contract based on a sovereign national authority. This contract was based on a set of rules –that is, the law– to which everyone was equally subject, but whose legitimacy was based on the consent of the citizens themselves. In the form of this contract that all modern democracies respect, the duty of obedience to this rule of law is subject to the reciprocal obligation of the state to ensure its citizens enjoy fundamental rights.

However, even in the most democratic countries, the general achievement of these political rights only came about through a long series of conflicts. In France, for example, women's suffrage was instituted in 1945. And in the United States, real universal suffrage dates back only a little more than a quarter of a century, following the adoption of legislation guaranteeing, in particular, the exercise of civil rights by black people in the southern states. Sometimes these democratic advances have also involved compromises with traditional forms of political authority: The United Kingdom remains a monarchy without a written constitution.

The final stages of this progress of citizenship in Western Europe and North America occurred quite recently, during great economic crises, when "citizens" obtained within their social contract certain economic and social rights within the general framework of a welfare state. It is this expansion that has ensured the preservation of the liberal, bourgeois order in Western Europe.

Elsewhere in the newly independent nations of the Arab world, a version of the state supported by mass mobilization has been the preferred instrument of civic integration, often preceding –and preventing– the development of a full range of political rights. Several Arab regimes, some monarchical, some republican, have indeed installed free education, social and medical guarantees, and job protection as symbols of belonging to the national community. But in doing so, instead of creating citizens in the modern sense of the word, these regimes produced political subjects who, in order to enjoy civil and social rights, depended on the goodwill of their leaders.

The role of the family unit

Furthermore, under the guise of responding to popular demands for national liberation and social justice, Arab nationalisms, whether

conservative or progressive, have often ignored the civil and political rights of citizens.

In this sense at least, the word "citizen," displayed proudly in the text of most Arab state constitutions, is a misnomer. The actual term *muwatin* (the usual translation of the word 'citizen') has an entirely different connotation in that it refers to political subjects whose subordination to the state is taken for granted, but whose loyalty is always suspect, and for whom freedom is both granted and temporary.

In this context, citizens of the Arab world are constantly struggling to achieve democratic forms of government, a struggle that is inevitably influenced by the historical and cultural specificities of each nation.

For years, historians, anthropologists, and political scientists have debated the failure (or unwillingness) of Arab states to create conceptions of political citizenship with clearly defined rights and obligations. The dominant influence that family and tribal ties play in the structure of Arab societies and cultures has been seen as a key explanatory factor. The family remains the center of social organization, economic activity, and cultural reproduction. The superimposition of traditional patriarchal models of authority in non-family relationships also obviously influences the formation of political subjects.

Of course, economic development, industrialization, urbanization, and the spread of public education have, over the past 40 years or so, changed the role of the family unit in many Arab societies. However, to the extent that these changes have remained unbalanced, limited and incomplete, the family continues to have a crucial and dual function. On the one hand, it remains an essential basis of support and security, limiting the negative consequences of eco-

nomic difficulties and guaranteeing the continuity of cultural values. On the other hand, it consolidates forms of patriarchal authority and makes it easier to inhibit the development of an independent, 'adult' relationship between the state and the citizen.

The relationship between the head of the family, an authoritarian yet generous figure, and the child, a dependent and docile protege, is similar to that between rulers and subjects. In the Arab world, the head of state is often the "father of the nation." Legitimate social benefits are, for example, presented as "acts of personal generosity" granted by a leader, not as collective benefits granted by an executive authority.

Paradoxically, it is in the most progressive countries that this understanding has been best illustrated. Even in Nasser's Egypt (1954-1970), the premier model of socialist planning in Arab countries, major reforms such as land distribution, food subsidies, and expanded social services were presented not as the logical outgrowth of a modern state, but rather more like personal gifts from the head of the national family to needy relatives.

This does not mean that a strong family structure is necessarily at odds with democratic citizenship. However, it raises the question of the extent to which a particular structure of dependency can serve as a model for other authority relations, especially in a political system that is simultaneously confronted with a crisis of development, urbanization, education, the legacy of colonial dependency, current perceptions of geopolitical weakness, and a series of national cults of personality. It further raises the question of whether this form of social structure contributes to retarding the political development of the Arab world.

The tenacious bonds of tribal, ethnic, and religious solidarity represent the second type of challenge to modern conceptions of

nationhood and citizenship. In competing for the allegiance of populations, tribes and nation-states give rise to a fundamental collective antagonism. Historically, the formation of the modern nation-state, with its monopoly of coercive authority, has resulted in the gradual erasure of earlier forms of authority and loyalty. But in the Arab world, important tribes in North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Upper Nile, and the Syrian Desert were able to preserve varying degrees of autonomy from central authority long after the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The nation-states that emerged after the departure of the colonial administrations dealt with this problem in two ways, neither of which was truly compatible with modern notions of citizenship. In most cases, Arab rulers dealt with the tribal challenge through a mixture of repression and co-option (marriages, alliances, personal favours). But wherever the model that was defined by Ibn Khaldun dominated, the state took the form of a fusion between tribal solidarity and centralized authority, all of it imbued with paternalistic and religious benevolence. The politico-religious movements of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa represent the most obvious examples of such a development. However, in these cases, the extension of central authority was based on coercion rather than on the consent of the citizen, which alone is the basis of the legitimacy of the modern social contract.

The political role of Islam represents another, more recent, factor that has been put forward to explain the formation of citizenship in the Arab world. Western commentators have often simplified a particularly complex historical development by observing that in Europe, the development of the nation-state and democratic political citizenship were accompanied by the secularization of politics and a constitutional separation of church and state. This development had little equivalent in the Arab world. The so-called Islamist political movements, as well as many conservative regimes,

instead claimed to base their legitimacy on the complete integration of religion and politics. And those countries that have sought to encourage secularization find themselves on the defensive, faced with their own failures and the results of mistakes that led them to underestimate the attachment of Arab societies to Islamic values. Religious invocations of transcendental authority have often reinforced structures of dependency, thus delaying the development of modern political citizenship.

In its radical or conservative form, the appeal to Islam can then, in the name of staying loyal to tradition, be transformed into the legitimization of an undemocratic order that serves to prevent renewal.

The proper use of Islam

However, Islamic thought and practice goes beyond today's authoritarian version of Islamism. The presence of the latter does not signify that Islam is incompatible with the existence of political and social rights. In fact, it could be argued that the mere suppression of Islamism is tantamount to restricting modern citizenship, by undermining Islam's true progressive principles of equality and justice. Indeed, from Islam and its values can come the creation of a democratic political space. No model of secular society or separation of church and state demands that it should be excluded.

The Quran and the Sunnah set out principles that are entirely compatible with the notion of modern citizenship discussed here. For instance, the concept of Shura requires community debate and consultation as helping to anchor political authority. In the Islamic tradition, the particular forms of this social dialogue have always been the subject of vigorous discussion. Modern Muslim jurists and thinkers, in particular the classical Salafiyyah movement, argues

that Shura in the contemporary context means elections and parliaments. Such theorizing recommends the use of reason to develop new rules to respond to economic, political, and social change whenever Islamic scriptures are not sufficient to determine a course of action. Finally, Islam encourages the community to decide by consensus, or *Ijmaa*, the best way to advance the common good. For decades, most Muslim countries have determined their political choices on the basis of these Islamic traditions.

The reaffirmation of religion in the face of politics is a phenomenon not limited to the Arab and Muslim world. It can be found in countries as different as Israel, India, and the United States. Neither does the advance of secularization mean the disappearance of religion from the public domain. For even in advanced Western democracies, it has often meant a compromise between religion and politics; consider that the United Kingdom retains a state religion, and Germany subsidizes religious worship. No model of socio-political evolution, including the most closed dictatorships, has resulted in the exclusion of religion.

To return to Islam: the values of justice, equality, and community inherent to this faith can be defining assets for developing true citizenship in the Arab world today. There is nothing in this religion that opposes the promulgation of a democratic political space. And it is to the construction of the latter that the Arab leaders should address themselves, without delay, in order to face the challenges that shadow the end of this century.

Hicham El Alaoui is a member of the advisory council of Human Rights Watch and researcher at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University (California). He is also the cousin of Mohamed VI, King of Morocco.

The Moroccan Monarchy, Tempted by Reform

Ensuring democratic transition and a sustainable throne

September 1996

By referendum on September 13, Moroccans will vote on the text of a new constitution. The institutional system desired by King Hassan II should be in place by May 1997. Faced with the challenges of poverty, inequality, and corruption, the country needs profound change in its political culture in order to advance on the road towards democracy. This is the meaning of the reform proposals that a Moroccan intellectual has sent us from Rabat.

Like many countries, Morocco is called upon to redefine itself, a situation that is conducive to both positive renewal and risk of regression. How should Morocco face the new global situation, whereby greater economic rigor is combined with the demands of political openness and a more intense cultural interaction? How might it respond to the unstable mix of increased political maturity and growing economic insecurity, not to mention the ferment of youth? These are burning questions, especially for a country that must respond to them while ensuring the well-being of its citizens, the continuity of its history and traditions, and its attachment to Islam. As the twenty-first century dawns, the party that happens to

be in power as well as the next ruler, Mohammed Ben Hassan (1), must tackle these issues directly with the support of all citizens. Morocco must seize the historic moment or regress.

Faced with the relentless dynamic of change, we must reflect on the following elements: the distribution of government responsibilities, the imperatives of the economic and social situation, the role of political parties, and the place of the monarchy. We need to clarify, with rigor and responsibility, this debate which is already well underway.

A crisis of government legitimacy affected Morocco in the 1990s. Repeated attempts at "alternation," as well as recent proposals from the *Koutla* (a democratic bloc of opposition parties), have attempted to remedy the growing lack of credibility among governments that have suffered from successive structural adjustment programs, rising unemployment and inequality, without commensurate improvements in productivity and investment rates. In the absence of a clearly defined social project, with a limited mandate and insufficient transparency, governments will only see their discredit grow.

Contrary to the requirements of openness, significant authority has been monopolized by a single center, the Ministry of the Interior, whose independence from more established institutions is growing. Its effectiveness, based in large part on the ability to free up resources for the most advanced technologies and the most qualified cadres, turns on subjugating most other ministerial functions, including those of justice, education, and information. It makes everything from culture to weather a matter of "security." Through the multiplication of administrative agents and networks across the country's regions, a new "security framework" has substituted for regional development.

Indignation of citizens

Rather than preventing social and political problems, these methods mask them until their severity triggers spectacular but arbitrary security operations. Stifling vital information about structural problems reduces any chance of solving the problems properly. Hundreds of women in Casablanca were raped by a police chief before this abuse of authority was brought to light. All too common in Morocco, this kind of "non-secrecy" shared by so many is the result of intimidation, and deepens the alienation of the people from the regime. Developing a healthy political culture requires exposing all abuses, not covering them up.

The recent and untimely "clean-up campaign" shows that addressing widely known corruption problems at a late stage can have disappointing effects. In the absence of a coherent system of control and legal justification, well-intentioned initiatives can be interpreted as forms of judicial blackmail. The government's unclear explanations, which justified this "campaign" by the development of Morocco's economic relations with Europe, only succeeded in angering many citizens, as if corruption and abuse of power should only shock foreigners rather than Moroccan citizens.

The problem of corruption in Morocco cannot be dealt with by one department alone; it requires a profound change in political culture. The law must apply equally to all, without privileges due to personal relationships or wealth. Entitlements are common in many societies, and Morocco has a long way to go to end the habits of spoiled elites.

No one should be able to bribe anyone to get a permit or authorization, and no one should be able to bribe anyone to get out of a ticket, or to avoid waiting one's turn. These daily practices not only humiliate people, they provoke public rage among those

who lack the means to escape the same hassles. They offend the public's sense of dignity.

These frustrations, combined with the sacrifices imposed by the macroeconomic realities of growing poverty and inequality, create an explosive social and political situation. Caught in a dilemma between necessary economic reform and the population's increasing intolerance of "structural adjustment" (itself a negative program perceived as a response to foreign pressure), Morocco cannot stand alone and hide its dependence on a global economy dominated by larger powers. Its openness to investment remains vital. Yet, this requires freeing economic structures from the political pressures that serve to hinder the emergence of new elites, and from the bureaucratic entanglements that are often mere excuses for corruption. We must ensure that economic reforms benefit not only investors and businesspersons, but also the average person.

The terrible problems of poverty, inequality, and corruption, deplored in the West where they are seen as the breeding ground for so-called "Islamic fundamentalism," require a coherent and long-term policy. Although fundamentalist movements have not yet developed to any worrying extent in Morocco, the official discourse cannot credibly maintain that "there is no Islamist problem." This phenomenon has emerged as an expression of resistance to the negative effects of economic and cultural globalization, and it could represent an alternative in the absence of other mobilizing movements or, failing that, social justice. Poor urban areas are gradually succumbing to the influence of Islamists, who bring to bear local welfare networks, the moral appeal of their community involvement, and a reputation for incorruptibility. In some neighborhoods, no wedding or religious celebration can be held without the approval of an Islamist group. Many cultural, professional, student, and trade union associations have also come under their control.

No Islamist party is yet participating in the elections, but these groups are influencing votes. Growing abstention and blank ballots are silent challenges to the credibility of the institutions. With a political opening, Islamists would likely achieve immediate electoral success, which would only have serious consequences if fundamentalism became the sole defender of justice and emancipation. Thus challenged, governments will have to implement economic reforms that take into account the material security of the poor as much as the satisfaction of privileged elites and bureaucrats, whether Moroccan or European. This brings another implication into view: Morocco is being forced into new forms of austerity. State paternalism is no longer enough, and there is no guarantee that the development of a political democracy would lead to greater prosperity. The opposition will have to justify its demands for higher salaries and better public services, based on well-calculated budgets.

Given these pressures, pragmatism is essential. It is necessary to mobilize the economy without being subject exclusively to the dogma of the market. Every state relies on fiscal systems, market or regulatory mechanisms, and on its capacity to intervene into the economy according to a balanced mix of social needs, cultural traditions, and political expectations. Morocco cannot follow a different path, and its European partners and friends will have to understand this.

These difficult choices require a coordinated policy approach, considerable resources, and the contribution of all. Corrupt officials, who hinder the business community and annoy honest people, can be dealt with through periodic raids, but only the professionalization of the civil service and the police will lead to the long-term eradication of corruption. One can try to maintain stability through repression, but only the responsible adaptation of social and economic policies to the basic needs of the citizens will lead the way forward.

With the sovereign's challenge to make 1996 the Year of Change and Koutla's input on constitutional reforms, a dynamic process on the forms of potential democratization and the future of the country has been initiated. Opposition parties, first and foremost the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) and Istiqlal, have raised issues of legislative structure and government accountability to citizens. Their proposals enshrine their commitment to democracy, equality, and transparency, and are rooted in an historical and popular base. They deserve attention.

Reigning differently

However, the participation of these different political groups in the government is not a panacea. They have so far been too selective in their defense of democracy. The nationalist and Salafist ideology (2) of Istiqlal continues to be conformist in many respects, leading it to defend a fixed conception of society; and the populism of the USFP is aimed at rallying crowds rather than directing momentum. Hesitant to join the call of a million Moroccan women for reform of the personal status code, these opposition parties have shared the popular enthusiasm for "progressive" but undemocratic Arab states. They are also more likely to mobilize on the basis of economic frustration than to present clear programs. Their transformation from a protest movement to a management force will not be easy.

This is especially true, since a generational problem affects these parties as well as Moroccan politics as a whole. In the hope of achieving some semblance of democratization, they have played the role of a "loyal opposition" for a long time. They have served as an integral part of a limited pluralist electoral system that no longer fulfills its function as a mechanism for social integration. They have been kept out of power by repression and manipulation, but have nevertheless participated in the sterile game of rewards

and favors. Yet it is the marginalized youth and the urban poor, the majority of Moroccans, who will really decide the country's future. They are not convinced that the opposition parties' orientations and practices qualify them to lead the country out of the crisis.

Reflecting on the future of Morocco means questioning the place and function of the monarchy, the centerpiece of the political system. In this period of transition, pressure will intensify to redefine its role. At a time when constitutional reform and the accession to power of new political forces are under discussion, these questions are inevitable. It is remarkable that the monarchy enjoys both wide recognition due to its cultural roots in history, and favorable standing by all citizens and parties. It will have a pivotal role in the changes that lie ahead. It appears as a reference point – a factor of unity, a mediating institution, and a constant of the Moroccan society, all at once.

To enable the monarchy to become this authority of reference, and to take a step back from daily affairs, a new legal and institutional framework will have to rationalize its function. Reform proposals must be examined on their own merits, in light of emergent changes in Moroccan culture and the global context. Most importantly, they must be methodically sequenced. It is obvious that the monarchy of the twenty-first century will rule differently.

Hicham El Alaoui is a member of the advisory council of Human Rights Watch and a researcher at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University (California). He is also the cousin of Mohamed VI, King of Morocco.

(1) Then-Crown Prince and, since 1999, the sovereign king of Morocco.

(2) A fundamentalist ideology that emerged during the Moroccan independence struggle.

Muslims and Citizens of the World

Total war against a diffuse peril

October 2001

The world has changed since the September 11 attacks. While the perpetrators have not yet been identified with certainty, they are most likely members of a transnational Islamist network. Whether this network is led by the quasi-mythical figure of Osama bin Laden or by someone else, the attacks force us to consider the global consequences for Arab-Muslim countries and the world.

The heinous attacks of September 11 implicate the anger and humiliation of peoples across the Arab and Muslim world who feel marginalized by global order. The existence of a network capable of such extreme violence in the name of Islam forces us Muslims to clarify our position on "Islamic fundamentalism." The West has its share of responsibility, but we cannot shirk ours. I am referring to the rise of a politically and socially totalitarian Islam, organized in armed groups that promote their one-sided interpretation of the sacred texts.

The majority of Muslims want their religion to live in peace alongside different faiths, benefiting from opportunities offered by the contemporary world. They do not seek to force Muslim and non-Muslim citizens of any country to live in a single mode. Nor do they want to wage war to propagate their religion. These tensions between openness and totalitarian modes of living one's faith are not

limited to Muslims. There is a fundamentalist Christian movement in the United States, with language similar to that of Bin Laden. In the name of their religious claims to a Greater Israel, extremist Jewish settlers are also prepared to lead their country into war.

The influence of Islamist movements on the deprived masses of Muslim societies has isolated cosmopolitan Muslim elites. These elites live comfortably under regimes that continue to tolerate inequality and massive poverty. Ironically, many of these authoritarian regimes initially used Islamist movements as a counterweight to repress other forms of opposition.

The success of this type of intolerant Islamism proves that freedom-loving Muslims have not been able to defend their cause with sufficient vigor, and also shows the urgency of the work to be done. Any Muslim today, who thrives in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-faith world, must passionately defend a tolerant Islam. This means that we must equally stand for social justice, democratic political institutions, and international relations that respect the dignity and sovereignty of all nations.

Such commitments require a great deal of political courage, without which we will not succeed in preventing Islam from falling into the hands of killers who hijack it. There is nothing contradictory about being a Muslim, a defender of the disadvantaged, a defender of the Palestinians, and a citizen of the world all at the same time. We must fight for these ideas in our respective social spheres. The events of September 11 are a reminder of the urgency of this task. We Muslims have been challenged by the perpetrators of these attacks. We must rise to that challenge.

The dangers arising from these events are extremely serious. These are not just any terrorist actions, such as those perpetrated by the IRA, the ETA, the Palestinians in the 1970s, or even the

recent "suicide bombers" in the Middle East. These actions were intended to draw attention to a grievance or to avenge a particular act. They always constitute a call for reparation for what is felt to be an injustice. Responsibility is claimed to give them political meaning.

Neither are the attacks of September 11 linked to any specific situation. Their essential motive is not to right a particular wrong, but to fit into a strategy, rooted in a religious conviction, aimed at invoking a global war pitting the "West" against the whole of a "Muslim world." The small group responsible for these attacks knows that it can only carry out this confrontation if it succeeds in provoking in a large part of the Muslims the absolute anger and determination that motivates the few thousand members of their movement.

Hence, the logical refusal to claim responsibility for these attacks, for the aim is to provoke a wider conflict. The attackers want to make it difficult to know exactly who to condemn and who to strike, to make it difficult not to retaliate against a wide range of Muslim targets, in the hope that indiscriminate retaliation will inflame the anger of all Muslims.

"No one has the right to make a mistake"

If the new Islamists succeed, they will have won a decisive battle. They will be prepared to fight the inevitable next battle with even greater force. The general uprising of the Muslim world, their only hope for victory, will be all the more imminent.

We must now take at their word the perpetrators of these attacks, who have long spoken of holy war and whom we have long considered marginal. They have drawn the world's attention to them and forced us to realize their determination. Anyone who knows

the Muslim world will have no trouble imagining the possibility of such an uprising – if not on the apocalyptic scale imagined by the hijackers, then at least on a regional or national scale.

How do a few thousand individuals create their version of a "clash of civilizations" that no one wants? One only has to look at the possible consequences of American reprisals to see that the hijackers may have found an answer to this question.

The United States will respond to these attacks with force, not just for revenge, but because the attacks will only stop once their roots are cut out. But, for the reasons mentioned, it is difficult to target those roots. We are dealing with a small, well-disseminated, and hidden network, whose members operate within a mass of people who share their frustrations. The conflict will get out of hand. In the event of an American attack on Afghanistan, a challenge will be issued to Pakistan. It is in no one's interest to have a Taliban-like Islamist regime in a country with nuclear weapons. How will India, another nuclear power, react? And China? How will the Russians react in Chechnya and throughout the Caucasus?

The coming events will affect Muslim communities in the Balkans, as well as those in Western Europe, which are more recently established. If the United States does not quickly achieve results that match the drama, it may be tempted to escalate dangerously. If they attack Iraq, the conflict will spread, and the unrest will not spare any country.

That is why the most effective American strategy is to target its response very precisely. The United States must resist the temptation to pressure Arab governments to target peaceful Islamist currents unfairly, which would create a vicious circle that must be avoided. Only through a comprehensive approach can we hope to isolate the perpetrators, deter new recruits, and prevent an uprising.

This strategy requires a fundamental reevaluation of U.S. policy toward Arab and Muslim societies. A first step is for the United States to demand an end to Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories and accept the right of Palestinians to an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital, a holy city for all Muslims.

This re-examination of American policy is the indispensable condition for any "victory" in this "new kind of war." Invoking patience, and promising to deal with the problem of Palestine after having dealt with the problem of terrorism, is no longer credible. This card has been used too much already; the last one dates back to the Gulf War, ten years ago, and we are still awaiting the result. Hundreds of millions of Muslims and many Europeans will immediately decide where they stand in relation to American decisions, depending on what is done about it, starting today.

The United States must also consider its responsibility for creating a "terrorism" that has turned against it. It has promoted this "terrorism," creating networks for its own purposes and supporting repressive regimes that terrorize its own people. Will the American government critically examine its past use of fanatics, like many Arab regimes, to serve its geopolitical interests?

Violence is globalized. Conflicts, injustices, and victims from "over there" are knocking at our door. International politics means local politics, and leaders will have to answer to the world. Poverty, inequality, repression, and arrogance are all problems to be solved. The ravages of neoliberal globalization are felt on Wall Street and in the villages of Central Asia. These are problems of global security. This time, there is no room for error.

Hicham El Alaoui is a member of the advisory council of Human Rights Watch and a researcher at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University (California). He is also the cousin of Mohamed VI, King of Morocco.

Where do we go from here?

The Arab world after the occupation of Iraq
October 2003

Unless sovereignty is restored to the Iraqis, a United States Security Council resolution will not get the United States out of trouble. Just a year before the presidential election, the US faces the first failures of the neoconservative strategy for democratising the Middle East. Can the Arab world take up the challenge?

BE CAREFUL what you ask for, you might get it, and the United States seems to have got what it asked for in Iraq: a quick military victory that eliminated Saddam Hussein and his threats (whatever they were), and a beachhead for its proclaimed project of remaking the Middle East on democratic lines. We have to recognise a fundamental, challenging fact: whatever we think of Washington's strategy for changing the Middle East, we cannot deny that it has a bold one, that mobilises its great power for its desired ends. If we don't like the strategy, we should produce our own, mobilizing our strengths for our own agenda. But we also have to recognize an undeniable disparity in power. Most of the world opposed the war but could not stop it.

And poignantly, the Arab and Muslim world was unable to resist it, and is too feeble to muster the unity and strength of purpose needed to bring its concerns to the fore. The triumphal slogans of pan-Arab unity have given way to disillusioned recognition of

debilitating political, social and military weakness. Until we can overcome that weakness, we will have to contend with an agenda set by others. With its conquest of Iraq, the US has set an agenda, with which it, and we, must now contend. Let us hope that Arabs will take the opportunity to shape this agenda in ways that help the region and its people.

We need to acknowledge that, from the point of view of a liberal, pragmatic and democratic Arab nationalism, much needs changing in the Middle East, starting with the brutal despotism exemplified by Saddam Hussein's regime. The stubborn refusal of democratic reform, the persistence of one-man or one-party political rule, the inability to solve severe economic and social problems, the increasing influence of fundamentalist and (related, but different) jihadist currents, the political situations polarized between fundamentalism and secular tyranny: all of these create a troubled landscape. There has hardly been enough movement for progressive change in this landscape, whether from regimes, elites or the street.

In a world fearful about unstable states and aggressive non-state actors, there is good reason to want change in Middle Eastern societies. There is no question that Osama Bin Laden and 11 September 2001 have brought these concerns to the forefront in the West, and the world. The Middle East seems to have replaced Europe as the center of world politics –the fork in the world– historical road, where choices must soon be made that will shape the world's future. We shouldn't think of a battleground for a clash of civilizations, but of a forge in which new parameters of global tension and cooperation will be cast. The tools include ideas of legitimacy and international law, self-defense, national sovereignty, pre-emption, and the right to possess, brandish and use small-scale or massive violence to force outcomes.

Unsurprisingly, there is disagreement about the meaning of these terms, and the aims and methods they imply. For all its boldness, the attempt of the US to impose a direction on this historical process is riven with contradictions. The real effects of the project are likely to be incongruent with its proclaimed purposes. The most insistently repeated justifications for US intervention in Iraq, about weapons of mass destruction, Saddam's ties to al-Qaida and his reputed ability to threaten the world's most powerful country, are the least convincing explanations of what the war was about. The credibility of these warnings, never high in the international community, has now eroded so badly even in the US that it is hardly worth discussing. The administration's most ardent proponents of the war have admitted that they were more convenience than fact.

So we need another explanation for what the US thinks it will accomplish in Iraq. The record indicates that the conquest of Iraq is the first major step in a mission to redefine the geopolitical world and the role of the US in it. This mission was conceived before 11 September, although the crimes of that day gave it domestic political sanction in the US, and allowed it to be recast as an international war on terrorism.

The National Security Strategy (NSS) of the US was published in September 2002. Journalist William Pfaff has described it as "an implicit American denunciation of the modern state order that has governed international relations since the Westphalian Settlement of 1648" meant to supersede the existing principle of international legitimacy. It says that if the US government unilaterally determines that a state is a future threat to America, the US will pre-emptively intervene in that state to eliminate the threat, if necessary, by accomplishing regime change" (1). To preserve the possibility of such pre-emptive action, the strategy advocates US dominance in

every region of the world, and repeatedly insists that the US will act pre-emptively to "forestall hostile acts by our adversaries and to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing military build-up in the hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the US" (2).

This document is a blueprint for preserving the US as the sole superpower, for ensuring its unparalleled military strength, and thereby enforcing its political will in any region of the world. It seeks to forestall the emergence of states with enough local power –especially nuclear arms– to block US imperatives in any region. Iraq is a key country in a key region. The NSS also seeks to ensure that already powerful, nuclear-capable and potentially competitive nations –Russia or China– can never challenge the global hegemony of the US.

The war on Iraq is the culmination of a decade of intense intellectual and political work by a small group of neoconservatives (3), who have united with fundamentalist Christians and militarists in the new imperial coalition that has crystallized under the Bush presidency. It is the first implementation of a policy whose overall objective is to ensure US dominance in the world. In the Middle East, this strategy calls for changing the course of history in a radical direction that favors the adoption of US-style political and economic values, with the hope that complementary moral, cultural and even religious values will follow. In this scenario, the conquest of Iraq will interrupt the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. It will discourage support for Palestinian resistance and encourage the Palestinians and Arabs to submit to a peace plan. It will also put the US at the heart of Opec, ensuring oil price discipline and the centrality of the dollar as the world's settlement currency.

This is an audacious, even missionary vision. Scholars like Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami have helped persuade the US government that the Arab world is in such decay that it will continually pro-

duce ever more virulent forms of anti-US terrorism, and that it is unable, or can no longer be expected, to reform itself. The crucial selling point of this strategy, after 11 September, is the promise that eliminating regimes like Saddam's and changing the political culture of the Middle East will prevent the spread of WMDs to al-Qaida-like extremist groups. In this way, it is construed as a defensive necessity.

The real threat comes from nuclear weapons, which require industrial and scientific resources that are less widespread and more easily monitored. But the US administration uses the description WMD in a way that surreptitiously confuses nuclear with biological and chemical weapons, although the latter have proven an ineffective means of mass destruction, and difficult to employ tactically.

These weapons, however, are much easier than nuclear weapons to produce and hide. Any Arab or Muslim country with a rudimentary chemical or bio-pharmaceutical industry can be targeted as a future threat that might supply WMDs to some terrorist group who would use them against the US or its allies. The nations of the Middle East are being told that reaching a certain level of industrial and scientific development will be considered a threat in itself, unless they are securely in the US camp. Although this strategy clearly requires limiting the spread of nuclear weapons, it abandons the internationally accepted methods of proliferation control through treaties in favour of the more aggressive, unilateralist and pre-emptive doctrine of counter-proliferation, which embraces the possession of and threat to use nuclear weapons by the US and its favoured allies.

Most disturbingly, the main vehicle for achieving the strategic objectives of the NSS is military force. If governments don't realign themselves appropriately, the US will do it for them, via unilaterally imposed regime change. Considerations of international

law are dismissed. The ostensible humanitarian and progressive agenda remains a vague rhetorical addition to conquest. Indigenous political and social considerations are considered epiphenomenal problems that will solve themselves quickly after a demonstration of overwhelming power - which is "the language they understand". Whole cultures will be quickly overwritten by the neoconservative narrative of liberalization and democratization in the wake of US military victory.

This is an aggressive project, and a big gamble on the efficacy of military technology. It is a project that the international community largely rejected, and that the US public, which is very shy of casualties, would not have accepted unless they had been sold the idea that there was a real threat and a real possibility of quick success. Proponents of this aggressive unilateralism knew that it would be hard to sell "in the absence of some catastrophic and catalyzing event, like a new Pearl Harbor" (4). It was only the trauma of 11 September that persuaded so many to go along with it.

Anxiety about this zealous project among traditional sectors of the US foreign policy establishment persists, even if it has been effectively silenced for the moment. Everyone understands the potential to destabilize the Arab world. The Secretary of State to President George Bush Sr, Lawrence Eagleburger, said that if President Bush Jr "decided he was going to turn the troops loose on Syria and Iran, even I would think that he ought to be impeached" (5). But Iran and Syria and even Saudi Arabia are clearly in Bush's sights, targets for increasingly harsh and orchestrated criticism.

This tension between traditional and neoconservative foreign policy perspectives may soon be played out over these three countries. In Iran, traditionalists might like to cultivate ties with Iranian moderates to foster cooperation with the Shia in Iraq, negotiate a resolution of nuclear issues, and keep a stable supply of Iranian

oil - while cultivating long-term reforms in the Iranian political system. They see Iran as a difficult military target, where favourable changes are in progress and need only be properly fostered.

Hard-line neoconservatives, however, have no patience with a prolonged strategy of accommodation with not-so-fundamentalist clerics, in the naive hope that they will keep their word to foreswear nuclear weapons. This presages an imminent confrontation over nuclear facilities scheduled to come online soon (see United States: the Strangelove doctrine, page 4).

In Syria, the US wants to end support for Palestinian militants and the Lebanese Hizbollah. Traditional foreign policy elements might be willing to negotiate over this in return for assurances over Syria's concerns about Lebanon, the Golan, and the stability of the Ba'ath regime. Hard-liners seem bent on confrontation, accusing Syria of being the new depot for Saddam's WMDs, if not Saddam himself. The threats intensify and have already led to a military incursion, despite the fact that Syria is acknowledged to have been "one of the CIA's most effective intelligence allies in the fight against al-Qaida" (6).

The Saudi case highlights the radical change in strategy that is at stake in this tension between conventional and neoconservative perspectives. Traditional oil-oriented conservatives have always nurtured close and protective relations with the Saudi monarchy, which has been, since a pact made with President Franklin D Roosevelt in 1945, the guarantor of US access to reasonably priced Middle East oil. Now there is constant pressure to get tough with Saudi Arabia for supporting Palestinian militancy and Islamic radicalism, along with vague accusations that the Saudi regime financed, or knew in advance, about the 11 September attacks. That Osama bin Laden and most of the hijackers were Saudis does indicate the dangerous aspects of radical Wahabism. While the US benignly

neglected Wahabi proselytising worldwide in the context of cold war politics, neoconservatives now want the Saudi regime to dissociate itself from the Wahabism that has been the pillar of the legitimacy of Saudi rule.

Foreign policy moderates in the US and the world worry about the effects of such scattershot attacks, and fear that the immediate beneficiaries of crisis in the region will probably be radical fundamentalists. But hard-core neoconservatives do not shy away from upheaval. For them, short-term negative results will only highlight the undemocratic nature of regimes and societies that breed terrorism, and "in a series of moves and countermoves stretching well into the future" (7) force the US into a deeper, wider confrontation with reactionary forces until a democratic culture prevails, or is imposed, across the Middle East.

But will the Iraq war change the course of history? And if so, to what effect? The occupation and reconstruction of Iraq is now a starting point. History shows how difficult it is to restore trust, build new institutions, and solicit participation from diverse groups in a multiethnic society under the control of a foreign power. In the Balkans, there was the advantage of a clear multilateral mandate, with a civilian administration that derived its authority from the world community through the United Nations. As a result, all sectors of the population could be persuaded to join in political reconstruction. Neither civilian nor military authorities became targets of resistance.

The US mission in Iraq, and its grander ambition for the Middle East, are on far shakier grounds. The US occupation of Iraq is the result of an invasion that most of the world condemned, that no social group in Iraq solicited, and that gutted Iraq's civil infrastructure. The occupation needs to prove its worth to the Iraqi people and the world from scratch. Yet the whole operation be-

trays a lack of preparation for anything beyond military strategy, as though Washington had expected to inherit the Ba'ath regime's infrastructure intact. Even the task of restoring security is beyond the competence of an army; it needs a network of structures from local police to national judiciary.

Given the post-war devastation and the grandiose objectives, this will require an enormous financial and human commitment. If the US persists in unilateralism, all this will have to be accomplished with its own resources. Yet half of the US army's combat forces are already in Iraq, and the cost of the war is now projected at $60bn a year. Iraqi oil revenues will not cover these costs for years, if ever. But no country will want to subsidise the US effort, especially while it retains political authority and control of Iraq's oil resources. US complacency about the diplomatic and political dimensions of this project threatens to force it to draw on its own human and material reserves to a prohibitive extent.

In this context, pleas for significant troop contributions have fallen on deaf ears, especially those allies from "old Europe" who were insulted during the build-up to the war. Frantically seeking burden-sharing with Third World and Muslim cover, the US is again turning to Turkey; Paul Wolfowitz, in a telling indication of his commitment to democracy, scolded Turkey's military for not sending troops at the start, despite the Turkish parliament's vote against their deployment.

With attacks against US troops persisting, it becomes both more imperative and more difficult to get other nations involved. But the fate of the US intervention will be determined primarily by the responses of the important social factors in Iraq. At the moment, there is widespread anger at the breakdown of the social infrastructure, and impatience with any US attempt to retain ultimate political power after a short period. There are constant demonstrations and

calls for an end to occupation. The deaths of whole families at checkpoints and in sweeps have become commonplace. Sporadic but intensifying armed resistance has emerged. It is clear even to US soldiers that they are now perceived more as occupiers than liberators.

Both sides seem ambivalent about how much power to assert. US authorities cancel local elections and then quickly assemble a representative Iraq Governing Council (IGC). Some Iraqis, and most Shia, adopt a wait-and-see attitude, while others assassinate collaborators. We cannot know how widespread and well-organised the armed resistance will become, although it is foolish to assume that it is limited to Saddam loyalists. We do not know what factors will determine the level of upheaval; whether the infrastructure is restored, whether basic social needs are met, whether political power is in the hands of Iraqis, and whether the ethnic, tribal, regional and religious groups feel fairly treated.

The Kurds, effectively self-governed since 1991, begin as US allies holding in check their own potentially divisive agenda. The Sunnis, who have lost their dominance, start out resentful. Secularized Muslims are wary of the potential for Islamification. The Shia, 60% of the population, who were repressed under Saddam, have the most to gain from a new political order and might be expected to favour the US intervention.

This socio-political landscape means that no US plan for a pacified unitary Iraq can succeed without the co-operation of the Shia. Resistance against the US is unlikely to succeed if it does not include the Shia, and no resistance that includes the Shia can be repressed by the US without destroying both Iraq and any pretence of moral and political legitimacy. But Shia domination would threaten to split the country, pushing the Kurds towards autonomy, and alienating Sunni, Christian, and secularized Iraqis. The fate of the US project

for Iraq and for the whole Middle East stands or falls on a precise balance of support and self-restraint by the Shia.

The US-appointed Iraq Governing Council, with its Shia majority, has become the hoped-for vehicle of co-operative national reconstruction. But the larger Shia community is ambivalent and impatient. The ayatollahs of Najaf, Shia Islam's holiest city, have expressed, with different emphases, limited tolerance of the US presence.

Ayatollah Sistani, the most revered member of Najaf's council of Islamic clerics (the Hawza al- Ilmiya) has always been committed to Shia rule and has issued a fatwa demanding that Iraqis, not US authorities, choose members of a constitutional drafting committee, and that any constitution be put to a vote. Ayatollah Baqer al-Hakim leads the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution of Iraq (Sairi), a group with its own military wing, the Badr Brigade, which was based in Iran during Saddam's rule. This group, with ties to Iran, to Kurdish opposition groups and to Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress, is participating in the IGC. The wild card is Muqtada al-Sadr, son of a revered cleric assassinated by Saddam. Muqtada's charisma and militancy resonate among the young and poor. He mobilizes large demonstrations, where, with messages of support from Iran, he denounces the feeble IGC, the US, Saddam and colonialism, and calls for Iranian-style clerical rule and an Islamic army. But he avoids calling for violent resistance, which is not endorsed by the Hawza.

Questions remain about Shia tolerance to continuing US occupation, and about how demands for secular-democratic versus clerical-theocratic rule will be resolved within the Shia community, as well as between that community, other Iraqi groups and the US authorities. Indeed, in soliciting Shia support, the US risks promoting fundamentalism.

In Baghdad's poor neighbourhood, formerly Saddam city, now Sadr city, clerics and militias associated with Muqtada have been helping to restore order, financed by bricks of dinars from US forces. Their methods include calling for the torching of cinemas, the beating of alcoholic drinks vendors and men who refuse to grow beards, the veiling of all women including Christians, and the killing of unveiled and "sinful" women (8).

These are images that cause fear of a replay of Iran or Afghanistan. Replacing Saddam with the rule of the ayatollahs would jeopardies the unity of the Iraqi state, empower transnational Shia fundamentalism, and spell political disaster for the US. The tension between the US claim that it seeks only to enable Iraqi democracy, and its real need to control the agenda and outcome, is nowhere more evident than in the Shia conundrum. But what can the US refuse the Shia, who only have to hold back to make trouble?

The US cannot allow Iraq to drift the way of Afghanistan, a troubling precedent. Afghanistan and the Balkans demonstrate how much easier it is to defeat an army than to build a nation, let alone to transform the culture of a region. The neoconservative imperial project is based on a critique of contemporary Arab political culture, and fear of its extremist currents, some of which resonates among pragmatic Arabs. But the remedy must, as the US claims it will, go beyond conquest. The complexity, pluralism, and stubborn cultural independence of a people cannot be abolished by a theory imported from afar.

The desperately needed democratization of the Middle East requires political intelligence and moral imagination; it requires supporting the forces in the region that have been courageously working toward that end: dissidents and journalists who risk their lives and freedom every day, Islamic reformers who defend the compatibility of Islam and democracy against extremists, women's groups, unions

and civil society organizations who fight for the right to organize and promote their ideas. It requires understanding that peaceful Islamic political movements are not necessarily violent jihadists, and that there is no reason why the former cannot be integrated into national pol itics, just as Christian Democrats are in Europe.

Any outside power that wants to intervene in the region for the sake of democracy must listen and speak to these forces, must respect and cooperate with them in fashioning political, social, and economic solutions to the problems they experience. These are the troops that will win the war of democracy, and be the most effective bulwark against jihadist extremism. It is they, and not a small cadre in Washington, who must lead the battle for reform in the Middle East.

Instead of listening to and supporting these indigenous reform movements, however, the US persists in allying itself with the authoritarian governments that smother them. In the name of a war on terrorism, it is now reinforcing the most repressive state apparatuses, and turning a blind eye to arbitrary incarceration of Islamists. If Arab reformers are to take seriously the US commitment to democracy, let alone go along with a policy of conquest, the US cannot continue to encourage mass arrests and torture.

If moderate Arab nationalists are to take seriously the US concern about the fate of Arab culture, or the threat of WMD, the US has to stop uncritically supporting an aggressive, nuclear-armed Israel, and has to insist on a peace plan that addresses Palestinian anger over occupation and settlements as much as Israeli concern for security.

Given the genealogy of the neoconservative agenda, this is perhaps the change of US policy we are least likely to see. But if the grand regional strategy, post-Iraq, becomes a means for forcing further injustice on the Palestinians, it will be seen by many Arabs, with

reason, as another means to accommodate Israeli intransigence. If Arabs are to take the US commitment to self-determination seriously, then democracy in Iraq cannot be expected to yield the same result as submission.

If the US cannot demonstrate this much respect for the region it claims to want to reform, then, outside a small radius of think tanks and compliant media outlets in Washington, and certainly among the people of the Middle East, it will be obvious that the US policy is politically and ethically in contradiction with itself.

The crux is that there is only one very-difficult-to-achieve outcome that will attain the strategic objective of the US in Iraq: a relatively quick transition to an unoccupied, unified, democratic and non-theocratic state. Only that result will make the Middle East and the world safer and more accommodating for the US. Only that result will provide what the grand neoconservative strategy claimed to seek from this war: a base from which to advance both US geopolitical interests and the further democratization of the Arab world.

That outcome would require an atypical commitment by the US to accept continuing casualties and to spend huge sums improving Iraqis' lives while the US faces cutbacks. Yet, any of the likelier, lesser outcomes –a break-up of the state, widespread misery, unrest or resistance, prolonged foreign occupation, the rise of fundamentalism or of any authoritarian regime– will be perceived as, and will be, a grave political failure.

Arab states, and all the weak but developing nations that are potential targets of regime change, need to find their own ways to seize the political and moral initiative. Designed for the cold war, old international structures like the UN, the Arab League and the non-aligned movement are not working. The US precedent of pre-

emptive war threatens to become a norm in conflicts throughout the world.

To prevent this, we need new structures of international solidarity that go beyond the traditional parameters of inter-governmental relations. We need an initiative of independent nations whose members commit to abiding by the standards of international law in their disputes with each other, to condemning and withholding all support (bases, overflight rights) from preemptive military action by others in contravention of international law, and to a thorough-going process of democratic reform, even if it means self-inflicted regime change. This must be more than a treaty organisation; it must be a forum for democratic self-reform, and, in the Muslim world, for Islamic self-reform.

By winning the war in Iraq, the US has put us all to the test. If Iraq does not become, as promised, a stable pole that catalyzes the democratization of the Middle East, the US will be weaker, its citizens in more danger, and the prospects for reform in the Arab world more problematic. And if Iraq and other Arab states do not find their own ways to democracy and popular legitimacy, the results will be just as disastrous.

Given these parameters, the prospects for success on the terms the US has set for itself, and for the world, are precarious. Whatever the US asked for in conquering Iraq, this is what it, and we, have got.

Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui, cousin of King Mohammed VI of Morocco, is founder of the Institute for the Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia at Princeton University. He has taken part in many international peace missions, including the United Nations' work in Kosovo. He lives in the US. This article is based on a lecture at the Harvard Business School on 29 September 2003.

(1) William Pfaff, International Herald Tribune, 3 October 2002. See also Henry Kissinger, "Iraq Poses Most Consequential Foreign-Policy Decision for Bush", Chicago Tribune, 11 August 2002.

(2) Idem.

(3) See Philip S Golub, "United States: inventing demons", Le Monde diplomatique, English language edition, March 2003.

(4) 2000 PNAC (Project for the New American Century) report.

(5) "Lawrence Eagleburger: Bush Should Be Impeached If He Invades Syria or Iran", antiwar.com, 14 April 2003.

(6) Seymour M Hersh, "The Syrian Bet: Did the Bush Administration burn a useful source on Al Qaeda?", The New Yorker, 28 July 2003.

(7) Jeffrey Bell, quoted by Joshua Micah Marshall in "Practice to Deceive", The Washington Monthly Online, April 2003.

(8) Susan Sachs, "After the War: Baghdad; Shi'ite Leaders Compete to Govern an Iraqi Slum", The New York Times, 25 May 2003.

Crisis and Reform in the Arab World:

For an Indigenous Democracy

October 2005

As the Iraqi people vote on a highly contested draft constitution on 15 October, the debate continues in the Arab world on how to lead the region out of crisis, misery and authoritarianism. While there is a broad consensus to oppose foreign–imposed reforms, calls mount to move away from the status quo and towards an indigenous democracy.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq have set in motion powerful and unpredictable geopolitical trends in the Middle East and beyond. One is the dynamic of democratisation and reform in the Arab world, for which the American administration is taking credit. This belated claim is based on the Iraqi elections and recent events in Lebanon. The reality appears more complex: contradictory in its effects, US policy is one of the three potential paths of reform, alongside those that can be described as "Islamist" and "progressive–indigenous."

The theoretical foundations of the American project are well known. The war in Iraq is the result of the long intellectual and political work by a small group of neo–conservatives, among them Norman Podhoretz, Richard Perle, David Frum, Bernard Lewis, Fouad Ajami – and President George W. Bush's favourite, former Soviet

dissident and right–wing Israeli politician Natan Sharansky. All share the same vision of an Arab world plunged into a persistent decadence, brought about by the cultural, psychological and religious defects of Arab (or Islamic) societies. This "genetic" flaw would explain the surge of increasingly virulent terrorist violence and would hinder democratisation, which is seen as the only remedy for all these ills. In the face of this terrorism, which can at any moment resort to weapons of mass destruction – chemical, biological, even nuclear – America, according to these neocons, cannot wait for the states to reform themselves. Rather, it must act to change the course of history in the Arab–Islamic world, to eliminate its defects and force it to become democratic. Only the United States can do this, using force if necessary.

With its coherence, this right–wing version of Wilsonism (1) is very appealing. The abstract invocation of "democracy" serves as the ultimate justification for America's actions, much like "socialism" once did for the Soviet Union. The importance of the Iraq War lies not only in the benefits it is supposed to bring to that country, but also in the step it would represent in the creation of a new geopolitical framework – a global system of security and reform, administered from Washington and allegedly for the benefit of all, including a long-suffering Arab world.

In brief, this war represents, in the vision of the neocons, the transition from abstractions – such as "evil" and "democracy" – to a concrete project of conquest, occupation and transformation. However, it also exposes dramatic and unforeseen consequences. The ideologues in Washington had promised a rapid transition to an independent, stable, unified, secular Iraqi state as a model of democratisation for the Middle East. Instead, the intervention resulted in tragedy which cost the lives of thousands of soldiers and tens of thousands of civilians, destroyed entire towns, and reopened torture chambers, while failing to guarantee the safety of citizens

or their water, electricity, or gas supplies. The result is a society in ruins and on the brink of civil war. In a cruel irony, Iraq has become, according to America's own intelligence services, a huge factory for terrorism – the very nightmare that was to have been avoided through its own invasion.

Like Vietnam in 1967

This is a crime that no regional reform scenario can justify or repair. "We succeeded in the elections," retort the neoconservatives, one of whose theoreticians praises the "irresistible popular participation" of January 2005, which would have "given power back to 80 percent of the Iraqi population – the Kurds and the Shiites." According to him, it was even the starting point for events in Lebanon, Egypt and the Gulf. And to quote the Druze leader Walid Joumblatt, for whom the Lebanese "revolution" "began following the American invasion of Iraq," the elections symbolizing "the beginning of a new Arab world." This ballot, concludes Charles Krauthammer, marks a "historic turning point," proves that "America is really attached to democracy" and "justifies" not only the invasion of Iraq, but also all the "Bush doctrine, synonymous of neoconservative foreign policy" (2).

This enthusiasm leaves one sceptical. The US originally did not want these elections, which were imposed by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. The winning parties all promised an American withdrawal. The "irresistible turnout" reached a ceiling of 58 percent of registered voters, including just 2 percent in Sunni areas. As the editor of the Beirut Daily Star quipped: "I have never heard [the idea that the Lebanese were inspired by Iraq] anywhere but from Walid Jumblatt. What happened next has dampened the euphoria." As one senior US official put it, "What we wanted to achieve was never realistic (...) We are getting rid of the "non–realism" that prevailed

at the beginning." (...) We are getting rid of the "non–realism" that prevailed at the beginning (3). The last time Americans said they were "surprised and touched" by the " importance of the participation" in an election "despite a terrorist campaign of destabilisation (4)," the turnout had reached 83 percent. It was Vietnam in 1967.

The rising power of the Shiite parties confirms the Faustian nature of the US pact with the conservative Shiite clergy. The latter's links with Iran obviously clash with the democratic pretensions of the American project. In the laborious drafting of the constitution, Washington pushed to avoid any breakdown in negotiations, but also any embarrassing solution on the controversial issues of federalism and the role of Islam. The two points hold together: Iranian–inspired fundamentalism has taken such strong roots locally – as in Basra, where the British bought relative calm by allowing a strictly fundamentalist social regime to be built – that some Shiites are proposing the establishment of an autonomous region governed by their interpretation of Sharia law, which the Americans will have great difficulty in preventing. Herein lays the grotesque paradox. "We are planning to establish a democracy," comments an American official, "but we are gradually realising that we will end up with a form of Islamic republic."

The history of the Middle East has long been marked by the tension between Arab demands for independence and Western domination guided by the thirst for oil, Cold War rivalries, and the creation of Israel. In the last period, Islamism succeeded Arab nationalism and socialism in leading the resistance to Western pressure. And yet, despite the apparent antagonisms, Washington and its European allies have always accommodated Islamist movements, in one way or another.

The most conservative Muslim country in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia was also for a long time the closest to the United States.

The latter's support for the Shah (from Tehran's point of view) and then the 1979–1980 hostage crisis (from Washington's point of view) made Iranian–American relations more conflictual. In Algeria, the West accepted the cancellation of democratic elections in order to prevent Islamists from coming to power. In Turkey, on the contrary, it tolerated the accession to power of a party with an Islamist tradition. This government did not participate in the invasion of Iraq, and not least because adopting a cautious foreign policy to potentially join the European Union weighs heavily on Ankara. In sum, as researcher Mahmood Mamdani points out (6), what guides the policy of the United States is not so much the principled refusal of fundamentalism or the permanent support of democracy, so much as the search for the best way to ensure its superpower domination across all contexts.

The current US administration has recently played a new card: it declares itself ready to shake up the status quo in the name of democracy. Thus, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently announced a radical rethink of sixty years of diplomacy that "sought stability at the expense of democracy (...) without achieving either (7)." Yet, what is the value of this commitment to the "universal" ideal of "democracy in and for itself" (8)? Will Washington endorse a democratic victory for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for Osama bin Laden's followers in Saudi Arabia, for Hezbollah in Lebanon, for Hamas in Palestine or for Shiite fundamentalism in Iraq?

The difficulty is so obvious that even some of President Bush's defenders "despair" of the "democratic deviation" of the "war against militant Islam" (9). In fact, considering the contradictions generated by American interventionism, how can we explain that American officials lock themselves into this counter–productive strategy of "democracy for its own sake"? Do they believe they can more easily defeat radical Islamists once they are in power?

Indeed, is this a rational exposition of a policy with unavowable objectives – or ones they deliberately ignore? Aware of the Israeli Likud's influence on the neoconservatives, some observers also suggest that the latter actually intend to destabilise and weaken the Arab states, even if it is at the cost of bringing Islamic fundamentalism to power.

Given all this dissonance, it is clear that the Bush administration's foreign policy is an enigma, so incompatible are its stated intentions with American interests. When Shiite fundamentalist religious leaders took power in Iran, the US backed away from its "human rights" rhetoric. Having themselves brought Shiite fundamentalist leaders to power in Iraq, will they soften their "anti–Islamist" stance? And if movements like Hamas came to power in other countries tomorrow, would they return to pre–9/11 "anti–fundamentalist" stability pacts with authoritarian elites?

Religion, culture and class

The confusion of Western positions on Islamism and democracy does not exempt us Arabs and Muslims from clarifying our own position. There are many forms of "fundamentalism" here, but the simple and pure relationship that each claims to have with the Muslim religion is in fact complex. Most have a history of political quietism, favouring reform in the name of Islamic principles. Some militate politically: they equate the corruption that prevails in many Arab autocracies with forms of secularism and apostasy, and advocate reform through re–Islamization of the state – either by taking control or by provoking a wave of violence. The most dissatisfied have given birth to a new type of Islamism. These jihadists regard modern Arab societies as polluted by their assimilation of heretical Western values, and therefore claim to wage war on them to rebuild and purify the umma. They finely exploit the ten-

sions existing among the Muslim populations of Europe, who have become the primary vector for the dissemination of this ideology.

The success of the fundamentalists cannot be understood without appreciating the extent to which religion, class issues, cultural problems and politics are intertwined. In many Muslim countries, the popular masses are trapped by poverty, disturbed by the undermining of traditional mores, enraged by the unfulfilled promises of globalisation, and are often desperate but unable to leave their country while Westernised elites travel the world. In the absence of a secular and popular alternative, this provides a breeding ground for the sirens of fundamentalism. As a result, any real possibility of democratisation will be often synonymous with Islamisation.

Perhaps we have prejudged our strengths in the face of these ideologies draped in the Qur'an. But we have the means to deal with them effectively, while respecting our traditions and culture. In my country, King Mohammed VI courageously implemented the modernisation of the family code despite the strong opposition of Islamist groups, which intimidated many secular parties. In short, we can meet the fundamentalist challenge in our countries.

Let my position be clear: I am in favour of a moderate, progressive, and inclusive politics that is tolerant of different views on the role of religion in political life. While the independence of the political and religious spheres is no guarantee against corruption or reactionary policies, I am opposed to any form of theocratic rule, which is incompatible with a healthy democratic culture. While respecting Islam, the state must remain independent of religious authorities, but also avoid "punishing" the most pious by impeding their access to education or public life.

These questions need to be resolved within a democratic constitutional framework accepted by all parties. This requires strong

institutional guarantees. In a context of true political fairness and separation of powers, Islamist movements can be an integral part of the political life of their country. It is not enough to fear Islamism as a potential destabilising force. It is also necessary to understand that it can be transformed by integrating it into democratic life.

What Will Washington Do About Iran?

Painful for our societies, the debate on Islamism and democracy becomes explosive as soon as the "double standards" at work in Palestine as in Iraq becomes mixed with the obsessive "war against terrorism." Add to this the pervasive prejudices when it comes to Islam, stemming from the noxious traditions of Orientalism that still flavour many Western mentalities. Indeed, among the factors that have radicalized the fundamentalists are not just the self–importance of the Arabs, but also the arrogance of the West.

The Arab world therefore needs to debate the path it must take towards reform and democratisation, and also towards a progressive reconfiguration of faith and politics. We understand the interest of our friends around the world in these debates, and their desire to encourage the most peaceful and democratic alternatives. However, we cannot accept that any nation should assume the right to solve our problems through the use of military force, especially when undertaken in the name of democracy. Democracy will only take root in our societies by growing from within, indigenously.

In Iran, the US threat contributed to the surprising but democratic victory of a conservative candidate. Elsewhere, parties like Hamas and Hezbollah have succeeded in putting Islam at the forefront of national struggles, and are also winning democratic elections. Occupied Iraq has become a breeding ground for all kinds of extremism. In short, if fundamentalism does not, on its own or in

combination with democracy or nationalism, open a desirable path to reform, it becomes, once it is perceived as the sole partner of democracy or nationalism, an inevitable diversion on the very long road to a progressive society.

Dialogue, moreover, must be a two–way street. We also have a say in some of the major debates among our friends, in order to encourage the options that we consider most fruitful. After all, we have an enormous stake in the solutions that are chosen. And if American critics of the Arab world, even neo–conservatives, have undeniably identified dangerous trends in our societies, we must return the criticism.

Within American politics, what is emerging before our eyes is a powerful new political configuration, combining right–wing Christian fundamentalism, militant American Zionism, and un-restrained militarism that finds expression in the enthusiastic interventionism of the neoconservatives. Wrapped in the myth of the flag, the family and the church, American domestic politics is projected outwards in the form of an aggressive, unilateral and arrogant foreign policy. This "bloc" led to the intervention in Iraq and beyond, justifying violence and contradicting its own altruistic rhetoric. Hence the difficulty of changing this inseparable domestic and foreign policy.

The latter can also be explained by the increasing desecularisation of politics and the state in America. The fierce conflicts over the fate of Terry Schiavo, over the invocation of the Ten Commandments in the courts, and over the extent to which the government should be – in the words of one Supreme Court justice – "the ministry of God" (10), are proof of this. The President himself saw fit to intervene in a debate on the theory of evolution, and against the basic principles of science. "The Republican Party of Lincoln has become a theocratic party (11)," admits a Republican congressman.

No doubt this symbiosis explains the ease with which torture is tolerated and the chief executive is given unlimited powers to imprison indefinitely people who are neither tried nor even charged in the "war on terror." However, this also exposes the inability of such a powerful nation to relativise its own place in the world, to recognise its failures and faults, and to grasp that not all countries in the world are following suit. What remains is the propensity to mistake ignorance for innocence, arrogance for superpower, and a mixture of the two for naivety.

It is time for these issues to be the subject of a national debate in the United States. Respectful friends, we will encourage resolutions that are compatible, in our view, with the democratic traditions which have always been the basis of our admiration for this country. That is why, when it comes to reform, we want neither the militarized vision advanced by neoconservatives nor the abstract utopia pledged by Islamic fundamentalists. Will another vision or future open in the near future? Conceiving it has become difficult in any case, given the profound and unforeseeable repercussions of the Iraq war.

This leaves another problem. What will America do about Iran? For reasonable observers, the Iraqi quagmire makes the hypothesis of a new military action inconceivable, especially since the Iraqi Shiite leadership rejects any hint of aggression. And the apologies offered to Tehran by the new leaders in Baghdad for the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) lay the foundations for a new military alliance: did they not swear that they would never allow an attack against their neighbour from their territory?

These considerations, however, did not silence the aggressive rhetoric against Tehran, this time under the guise of it possessing weapons of mass destruction. Vice-President Richard Cheney even threatened to attack Iran with nuclear weapons in the event

of another terrorist attack in the US – even if Tehran had nothing to do with it. For the neoconservatives, while Hamas or Hezbollah can wait, Iran is a more enticing target. It remains a powerful state, which the destruction of its main enemies (the Taliban and the Iraqi regime of Saddam) has further strengthened. It now wields major influence over Iraq, and inspires a regional sphere of transnational Shiite influence. It is also a formidable military power capable of producing nuclear weapons, although there is no evidence of this as of yet.

This could lead Washington to consider the destruction of Iran as the only way to prevent it from becoming an irreversible obstacle to US–Israeli domination of the region. Moreover, for the neoconservatives in power, it would be a logical extension of their strategy of "creative destruction" (12). However, such an attack, even if carried out by Israeli forces with US approval, would plunge the Middle East into a disastrous spiral of violence and instability.

The Middle East continues to evolve. Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon is a sign of weakness and may also allow it to gather its forces, although it is unclear whether this will lead to internal democratic reform, support the repression of a possible rebellion (Sunni or Kurdish), or to lend greater resistance against American threats. Free from Syrian occupation, will Lebanon return to civil war or will it democratically reconcile its seventeen confessions, from Maronites to Shiites? In Egypt, have we just witnessed the beginning or the end of the democratic opening under Mubarak? In Saudi Arabia, tightly controlled municipal elections have benefited rigorous Wahhabists. Elsewhere, it will be difficult to tame emboldened Arab civil societies. In this uncertain context, moderate countries such as Morocco, Bahrain and Jordan have taken hesitant steps towards reform.

However, genuine reform – indigenous, progressive and capable of meeting the needs and aspirations of our peoples – must go beyond mild liberalization consisting of limited elections and superficial constitutionalism. It requires an end to what the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) describes in its Arab Human Development Report (2004) as the "black hole of the Arab state" (13). According to the document, the concentration of power in the hands of the executive – whether monarchical, military, dictatorial or the result of presidential elections in which a single candidate is nominated – has created "a kind of "black hole" at the heart of political life" and "reduces its social environment to a static whole where nothing moves." To get out of this situation, strong and immediate political and legal reforms are needed, respecting fundamental freedoms of opinion, expression and association, guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary and abolishing this "state of emergency (...) which has become permanent even in the absence of dangers that justify it."

A remarkable document, the UNDP report moves from historical and theoretical analyses of the concept of freedom in the Arab and Islamic world to a critique of "all forms of violation of human dignity, such as hunger, disease, ignorance, poverty and fear." Respectful of local cultures, it denounces the "prevailing environment of repression" and argues for a reconfiguration of "economic, political and social structures" allowing progressive social and political actors to use "the crisis of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes to their advantage."

The report further declares a statement that should reverberate loudly in our region: responsibility for this moribund state of affairs falls upon the "intellectual and political vanguard," which has so far "failed to play its social role as the conscience and leader of the nation." Some will consider this judgment harsh, as it overlooks the courage of journalists and dissidents resisting a ruthless repression. The rep-

resentatives of civil society must, however, "find a middle ground" for themselves and for the Arab world, without yielding to the influence of the great powers or allowing themselves to be drawn into the despair and violence to which many angry young people, deprived of all forms of peaceful and effective manoeuvre, could be drawn.

The magnitude of the task overwhelms us. It may even seem impossible, or even futile, to seek a way out of the apocalypse prepared by the two adversaries – accomplices of "creative destruction" – who each see in the other the incarnation of "evil" to be annihilated by a total war. Yet this is our mission. Sometimes, in a situation marked by so many negative factors, the duty of progressives is simply to keep alive the possibility of the positive. Politics will return. City after city, country after country, region after region, we must multiply the number of actors who refuse the apocalypse and prefer to instead build a freer and better existence.

Hicham Ben Abdallah El–Alaoui: Member of the Advisory Board of Human Rights Watch, researcher at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University (California); he is also the cousin of Mohamed VI, King of Morocco.

(1) Named after President Thomas Woodrow Wilson, who, in the aftermath of the First World War, with his "fourteen points," strongly advocated the right to self–determination of peoples – partly by replacing British power with American stewardship over the Middle East.

(2) Charles Krauthammer, "The neoconservative convergence," Commentary, July–August 2005.

(3) Robin Wright, Ellen Knickmeyer, "US lowers sights on what can be achieved in Iraq," The Washington Post, 14 August 2005.

(4) "US encouraged by Vietnam vote," New York Times, 4 September 1967.

(5) Robin Wright, Ellen Knickmeyer, art. cit.

(6) Mahmood Mamdani, Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror (New York: Three Leaves Publishing, 2005).

(7) "Secretary Rice urges democratic change in the Middle East," Press Release of the Department of State, Washington DC, 20 June 2005.

(8) Charles Krauthammer, art. cit.

(9) Andrew C. McCarthy, quoted in Justin Raimondo, "Recanting the war," Antiwar.com, 24 August 2005.

(10) Antonin Scalia, "God's justice and ours," First Things, no. 123 (May 2002).

(11) As stated by Republican Congressman Christopher Shays, in interview with Alex Chadwick, National Public Radio, 24 March 2005.

(12) Michael Ledeen, "Creative destruction: how to wage a revolutionary war," National Review Online, 20 September 2001. See also Walid Charara, "Constructive instability," Le Monde Diplomatique, July 2005.

(13) UNDP, Arab Human Development Report (Beirut: UNDP, 2004). The following quotations are also taken from it.

And the winner is... Iran

The arc of crisis revisited

February 2007

President George Bush is planning to reinforce the United States presence in Iraq and may be contemplating a strike against Iran, undeterred by military reversals, unpopularity among voters at home or the opposition of foreign governments.

United States policymakers were enamoured of the idea, after the 1979 revolution in Iran, that "the Islamic forces could be used against the Soviet Union. The theory was that there was an arc of crisis, and so the arc of Islam could be mobilized to contain the Soviets. It was a Zbigniew Brzezinski concept" (1). Conservative Islamic forces had already been used in the 1960s to marginalize and defeat secular nationalist and leftist parties; the same had been done in Iran as far back as 1953. Perhaps Iranian fundamentalism could be the catalyst of an Islamic insurgency in the soft under-belly of the Soviet Union.

The US subsequently explored sometimes conflicting policies in the Middle East and Central Asia. Its goals were to win the cold war and support Israel, but the means it used and the states it supported varied. The US officially favoured Iraq during the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-88, yet at the same time it acquiesced to Israel shipping arms to Iran. During the same period pro-Israel neoconservatives agitated for a turn toward Iran, since Israel still saw secular Arab

nationalism as its main foe, and supported Hamas as a counterweight to the Palestine Liberation Organization in the occupied territories. The pièce de resistance of this US policy was the alliance with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the 1980s to create an international jihad army to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (2).

Once the Soviet Union had collapsed, the US organized an international coalition in 1990 to evict the Iraqi army from Kuwait. Arab states from Syria to Morocco responded positively to an appeal based on international law and United Nations resolutions. They were assured that the coalition was not just about saving a dependable oil monarchy but about a new regime of international justice. When Kuwait's sovereignty had been restored, there would be a new world order in which all UN resolutions would be enforced, including resolutions demanding Israeli withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territory.

Despite considerable pressure the US decided not to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime in 1990. As a key player, the US secretary of defence Dick Cheney, said: "If we were going to remove Saddam, we would have to commit a lot of force. And once we'd done that and we'd gotten rid of Saddam Hussein and his government, then we'd have had to put another government in its place. What kind of government? Should it be a Sunni government or Shia government or a Kurdish government or Ba'athist regime? Or maybe we want to bring in some of the Islamic fundamentalists? How long would we have had to stay in Baghdad to keep that government in place? What would happen to the government once US forces withdrew? How many casualties should the US accept in that effort to try to create clarity and stability in a situation that is inherently unstable? It's my view that it would have been a mistake for us to get bogged down in the quagmire inside Iraq. And the question in my mind is how many additional American casualties is Saddam worth? And the answer is not very damned many" (3).

That was the opinion then of the same Dick Cheney who is now US vice president. Those who urged regime change in Iraq could take comfort in the long sanctions regime that followed. They formed organized pressure groups like the Project for the New American Century, they shifted easily between Israeli and US political establishments at the highest levels, and continually built political support for a future attack on Iraq when circumstances might be more favourable.

A cover for doubling the number of settlers

The Israelis were meanwhile comforted by the brief attempt of US secretary of state James Baker to put teeth into official US policy on the occupied territories, starting with the Arab-Israeli Madrid peace conference in October 1991. This was deftly swatted away. Never again would there be any serious effort by the US government to stop Israeli settlement expansion: after 1996 the "peace process" became a cover for a 200% increase in the Israeli settler population of the West Bank.

Eastwards along the arc of crisis, the dénouement of the war in Afghanistan was played out between the warlords of the Northern Alliance and the fanatical Taliban. With the cold war over, the US deferred to the interests of Pakistan, which was turning toward Islamic governance and thought of an Islamic Afghanistan as a strategic depth against India. Pakistan's military intelligence was happy to assure a Taliban victory and cultivate ties with the regime.

The US failed to take account of Arab and Muslim concerns in the decades that led up to the present crisis. Policies were made, armies raised, alliances formed and broken, wars fought throughout the lands (and over the bodies) of Arabs and Muslims, for reasons that always had to do with something or someone else. There were inconsistencies and reversals of policies toward Iraq, Iran, Shia

fundamentalism, Sunni fundamentalism, jihadist ideology, dictatorship, democracy, monarchical absolutism, Arafat, the PLO, Israeli colonization and the "peace process": all these demonstrate how Arab and Muslim concerns were always dispensable elements of policies that had been designed for other reasons. The US had its own motives: to assure a stable oil supply, win the cold war, demonstrate the hegemony of the US as the sole superpower, support Israel; once a goal was achieved, the US put off indefinitely the Arab and Muslim concerns it had invoked to gain support.

'Regret what?'

Nothing more insulted the Arab and Muslim world than Brzezinski's response when asked, three years before 11 September 2001, whether he regretted setting up a jihadist movement to provoke the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan: "Regret what? What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?" (4).

This is the field on which the world-changing recent events have been played out, from the attacks of 9/11 to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. In 2003 there was only one outcome that would produce a US "victory": a quick transition to an unoccupied, stable, unified, democratic and non-theocratic state. It was a huge gamble and the US lost it. A retired US general called it "the greatest strategic disaster in United States history" (5) . This defeat is an accomplished fact.

The winner in this conflict is Iran. The US strategy of disbanding the army and de-Ba'athifying Iraq removed Tehran's traditional enemy from the region, while the US reliance on Shia clerics empowered Iran's allies inside Iraq. The US now confronts a greatly strengthened Iran because of its own actions.

The consequences of this are far-reaching for the US and the Arab and Muslim world. For the past two decades the left-leaning secular Arab nationalism that defined the ideological framework of resistance to western domination has been losing ground to Islamist currents that enfold this resistance in deeply conservative religious ideologies. Political conflicts over national independence and paths of development are morphing into religious conflicts over cultural and communal identity. This paradigm shift was sometimes abetted by the West. Today the US debacle in Iraq has handed Iran new opportunities to champion Arab nationalism under the banner of Islam.

Iran is emerging as the champion of a new front of struggle that combines Arab nationalism with the rising tide of Islamic resistance. Iran has many important advantages: it can ease or complicate life for US troops in Iraq; it can help to keep the Israelis at bay through its Hezbollah allies in Lebanon; it can extend a lifeline to the Palestinians through its support of Hamas. Its influence extends to the Shia-dominated oil-producing areas of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Iran is poised to fill the huge vacuum of regional power created by the destruction of the Iraqi state, to affect the course of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and to transform the nature of the centuries-old Sunni-Shia divide.

A threatening gaze towards Iran

The fact that Israel and the US are turning their threatening gaze on Iran confirms its new strategic importance and enhances its status as the vanguard of resistance for the Arab and Muslim world. It is hard to see how the US and/or Israel would gain any long-term advantage from attacking Iran, although they evidently want to do so. There is no possibility of action beyond air strikes and limited special forces operations, which will not destroy the

Iranian regime but harden its resolve. Could this be why the US president and vice president have raised the possibility of using nuclear weapons? (6).

The regional and global consequences would be incalculable, but it might be a way to retard Iran enough to make a difference and reset the balance of fear in the region.

Another superficially shrewd strategy that has been floated in Washington is the exploitation of the Sunni-Shia divide, with the help of Saudi Arabia. Two contradictory tendencies are at work. There is a Sunni-Shia rapprochement, especially since the Lebanese war of 2006, which revealed the obvious affinities of Iran, Hamas and Hizbullah, and made Hizbullah's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, a hero throughout the Arab world. Respected Sunni clerics have unprecedentedly proclaimed that Sunni-Shia differences concern minor rather than foundation aspects of Islam (foru' rather than osul).

At the same time tensions are rising between the two sects elsewhere in the region, particularly in Iraq. For centuries Shia populations, concentrated in strategically important sites through the Arab world, have been a mistreated undercast, viewed with fear and disdain; this has filled them with resentment and rage. (And vice versa: the actions of the Shia militia in Iraq and the shameful execution of Saddam Hussein are causing hatred among the Sunni.)

There is an idea that Saudi Arabia could become the banker of a region-wide Sunni movement to resist the rise of heretical Shiism. Saudi Arabia bristles at the prospect that Shia theology and Iran might gain influence in the region, and has already pledged to protect Iraq's Sunnis if necessary. Can Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, Egypt, Jordan, the Kurds, Iraqi and Lebanese Sunnis, and Fatah, with the support of the US and Israel, counter the influence

of Shia Iran, Alawite Syria, and their allies, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine?

The Saudi grouping would need to produce an immediate just resolution to the Palestinian issue to have political credibility. But the US and Israel are not likely to grant it, since Israel is playing this game to avoid any such resolution.

This is a prescription for intra-Muslim civil war throughout the Middle East. Those involved would be seen as proxies tearing the Muslim world on behalf of Israel and the US. Who would the Saudi and Gulf-financed anti-Shia Sunni forces be? (In, for example, Iraq?) Westerners, and even the US public, might notice with dismay that the US government was building up Wahhabi jihad armies again: al-Qaida by another name. This scenario would not yield victory but fresh crises. The US neo-conservatives call this strategy "creative destruction" but an astute commentator more aptly named it "staticide" (7). Turning to the Palestine-Lebanon flashpoint, it seems that the US again embraces, or at least ends up accepting, such a strategy. One can understand why, judging from effect if not intention, Arabs and Muslims conclude that US policy in the Middle East is not to repair "failed states" but to produce them.

'Creative destruction'

The Israeli attack on Lebanon caused enormous destruction but ended in defeat. Israel was more isolated in the region and the world. Hezbollah never lost its ability to communicate effectively internally and to broadcast via television and radio to the wider population, or to inflict casualties on invading forces and attack Israel with rockets (8). Israel did not achieve either of its stated goals –the dis-armament of Hezbollah or the return of its captured soldiers.

The question for Israel in Lebanon, as for the US in Iraq, is whether it can accept defeat or whether it will be tempted to double down with more force to achieve some goals, or at least to restore some power of intimidation. Are these defeats the harbingers of fourth-generation warfare or only temporary setbacks? One thing is certain: the Balkans and 1990-91 Gulf war era of casualty-free victory through heavy bombing and hi-tech weaponry is over. The new battles are for the long-term control and allegiance of populations. Air power cannot guarantee victory and there is a heavy political and human price.

Washington has already paid a big price for its role in this little war. The sight of the Lebanese prime minister, Fuad Siniora, tearfully begging the US to restrain Israel from devastating his country may be the turning point in the relations of the US with the Arab world. The 14 March movement took power in Lebanon through a US-backed cedar revolution, and was lauded as exactly the kind of democratic reform that the US hoped to foster in the Arab world. Siniora was as friendly to the US as any Lebanese prime minister has ever been. But, given Israel's desire to teach Lebanon a lesson, Siniora was left in the lurch. Not only did the US prevent any ceasefire for a month, it resupplied the Israeli army.

The result did not only cause what Siniora described as the unimaginable destruction of the Lebanese civil infrastructure (9), it also weakened the government. Hezbollah now demands a bigger role in a new unity government and, in a cedar revolution in reverse, it is organizing its own massive, peaceful and disciplined street demonstrations, mimicking the tactics that the US and the West had praised and promoted a year earlier.

"Not concerned about appearing to take sides" (10) in this internal struggle, the US is now doubling its aid to the Lebanese army, which is intensifying its recruitment among the Sunni and Druse. The aim is to make the army capable of disarming Hezbollah.

These policies may go unreported in the US, but they are noticed in the Israeli, Arab and world press. After this war it will be hard to persuade the Arab and Muslim world that the US won't betray any ally, or any principle, to support Israel.

A terrible unintended consequence

The destruction of Iraq's civil infrastructure and the undermining of its political and social coherence has led to sectarian conflict and civil war, a terrible unintended consequence. It might have seemed an unfortunate coincidence when those elements also occurred in Lebanon; but when they unfolded in Palestine too, many observers saw a pattern. There is a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions in the Palestinian territories. Since the victory of Hamas in the January 2006 elections, the US and Europe have joined Israel in trying to starve the Palestinians into rejecting their own democratically-elected government. The predictable results of these assaults have been the breakdown of the social order and a slide toward civil conflict.

As a US journalist described it: "Palestinians in Gaza live encased in a squalid, overcrowded ghetto, surrounded by the Israeli military and a massive electric fence, unable to leave or enter the Strip and under daily assault. The concerted Israeli attempts to orchestrate a breakdown in law and order, to foster chaos and rampant deprivation, are on public display in the streets of Gaza City, where Palestinians walk past the rubble of the ministry of interior, the ministry of foreign affairs and the ministry of national economy, the office of the prime minister and a number of educational institutions that have been bombed by Israeli jets. The electricity generation plant, providing 45% of the electricity of the Gaza Strip, has been wiped out, and even the primitive electricity networks and transmitters that remain have been re-

peatedly bombed. Six bridges linking Gaza City with the central Gaza Strip have been blown up and main arteries cratered into obliteration. And the West Bank is rapidly descending into a crisis of Gaza proportions. What do Israel and Washington believe they will gain by turning Gaza and the West Bank into a miniature version of Iraq? Do they believe that creating a Hobbesian nightmare for the Palestinians will blunt terrorism, curb suicide attacks and foster peace?" (11).

Now there is concern that the US, with Israel's help, is providing advanced weapons to "Force 17 militants in Gaza associated with Fatah strongman Mahmoud Dahlan," and "according to Israeli and Palestinian security officials, the US weapons shipments have prompted an arms race with Hamas" (12).

Whatever the intent, the logic of social disintegration and civil war is unfolding, via US policy, in three areas that Israel has always identified as sites of resistance to its regional ambitions. There is a hard core of rightwing Zionists who believe that the Palestinian people must be subjugated within, or removed from, all the territory that Israel covets, and who believe that this can only be accomplished if all of Israel's recalcitrant neighbors, as well as the Palestinians, are rendered too weak to resist. It is dismaying, though unsurprising, to see such zealots occupying positions of power within the Israeli government. It is shocking to think that the US might go along with, even lead, such a destructive and self-destructive strategy, in deference to a misguided idea of what it must do to stay a friend to Israel.

'Saving the Palestinians means saving Israel'

If the US is a friend of Israel, it should not only resist any appeal to follow Israel down this path, but agree with a remark by an Israeli

commentator: "Israel's policies threaten not just the Palestinians but also the Israelis themselves. A small Jewish state of 7 million residents (5.5 million Jews), surrounded by 200 million Arabs, is making itself the enemy of the whole Muslim world. There is no guarantee that such a state can survive. Saving the Palestinians also means saving Israel" (13).

The US does not only face defeat in the Middle East, it faces a critical setback further east, in Afghanistan. No one questioned the right of the US to go after Bin Laden and al-Qaida with force. The decision to launch a wide-ranging military campaign involving Nato in order to reconstruct the politics of the country was fraught with risks. Success would require a decisive military victory, followed by a firm, lasting political and financial commitment to social reform.

In reality, the US relied on the warlords of the Northern Alliance for quick results in the field, and an imported president to cobble together the shell of a central government in Kabul. The US was unable to eliminate the top leaders of al-Qaida or the Taliban and soon turned from the Afghan front to Iraq. Bin Laden and his second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, continue to issue videos, while the Taliban, which maintained close ties with Pashtun tribes on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border, are regrouping in strength and threatening Nato forces, hunkered in compounds and emerging only for raids and airstrikes (14). Pakistan's foreign minister has gone so far as to tell Nato that it should accept defeat and leave.

The clumsy attempt of the US to engineer a noble, simple battle between itself and al-Qaida has stumbled into the intricacies of Afghan tribal and warlord politics; and also into Pakistan's complicated, risky game with Islamic fundamentalism. Pakistan sees that its internal Islamist groups provide the hard edge of the struggle in Kashmir and urges Nato and the Afghan government to accept the inevitability of a moderate Taliban presence in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has already ceded control of one of its own provinces, North Waziristan, to this presence, creating a base from which the not-so-moderate Taliban can attack Nato forces. The Taliban even resort to suicide bombs, previously unknown in Afghanistan, a tactic imported from Iraq: the Iraq-Afghan connection, via al-Qaida, is now a reality. So, the war on terror has made the US dependent on Pakistan, which is engaged in a structural alliance with radical Islam. The Pakistanization of Al-Qaeda may be turning into the al-Qaidisation of Pakistan, which is something the US media prefer to ignore.

An arc of crisis now extends from the Levant to the Indian subcontinent. In the next few months decisions will be made, especially in Washington, that will either exacerbate these crises or turn in a new direction, more amenable to sensible resolutions.

Western leaders need to understand that al-Qaida, the Ba'ath, Hamas, Syria and Iran cannot all be categorized as the "axis of evil". We need leadership capable of understanding the links between the crises and also of decoupling and defusing their different elements.

Syria does not threaten the US. It has already helped Washington several times and has its own legitimate national interests: to make a deal for the Golan Heights, whose occupation by Israel brings no benefit to the US. Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine act primarily in their national interests. The US could take many issues off the table, thereby advancing its own interests and helping to defeat real, fanatical terrorism. Washington needs to recognize that these groups are not all the same: they are not al-Qaida and left alone they will not become al-Qaida, any more than Vietnam became the tool of an evil empire. They could become manageable adversaries if engaged cautiously but fairly.

Influential voices from within the US political establishment suggest a change of direction: The Baker-Hamilton report is the most obvious example. President Jimmy Carter has called for an honest debate about US policy in Palestine. Repairing the damage done would need the acknowledgment of wrong decisions, and a move toward serious changes in policy. It would mean abandoning the idea that unilateral military force can solve complex political and social problems. It would need to stop unconditional support of Israel. Above all, the US must forget the idea that the diverse nations and peoples of the Arab and Muslim world are interchangeable elements of a single ideological scheme, to be manipulated for the benefit of the geopolitical needs of great or regional powers, the territorial needs of Israeli settlers or al-Qaida's imaginary *umma*.

Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui, cousin of King Mohammed VI of Morocco, is founder of the Institute for the Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia at Princeton University. He has taken part in many international peace missions, including the United Nations' work in Kosovo. He lives in the US.

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Arab Regimes Modernize – and Authoritarianism

Adapts to Internal and External constraints

April 2008

Since the first Gulf War (1990–1991), the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa have experienced a succession of upheavals that would have destabilized many powers elsewhere. However, most of them have managed to maintain archaic structures that neither the Second World War nor decolonization had made disappear. An effective opposition is struggling to emerge while the leaders are attempting to regain their virginity in the eyes of the world.

Let us recall the deluge of optimistic rhetoric unleashed by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and by the first Gulf War (January–March 1991). Saddam Hussein had been expelled from Kuwait and a new world order was now possible. The rules of international law and the resolutions of the United Nations would now be applied everywhere – including in Palestine.

In this deluge of prophesied change, a wave of democratization would sweep through the Arab world (1). Principles of democracy and human rights would become universalized, and authoritarian regimes would be strongly encouraged (but not forced) to democratize. On the economic scene, "structural adjustments" (including privatization and the reduction of state subsidies), free trade agree-

ments, the call for investment and incentives for entrepreneurship would finally lead to the emergence of vibrant and productive middle classes. These social and economic actors, in symbiosis with other national and international forces, would put the Arab region on the path of economic dynamism and democratization. As in Latin America and Southern Europe (i.e., Spain, Greece, Italy), astute elites would serve as catalysts for political transformation (2). Thus the Middle East would be able to join what was then perceived as a movement of global progress.

Twenty years later, these democratic expectations have brought only distressing results. On the political level, three types of regimes inhabit our region: "closed" regimes (such as Libya and Syria), where there is not even the appearance of pluralism; "hybrid" regimes (e.g., Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Yemen), where authoritarianism coexists with forms of controlled pluralism; and finally "open" regimes, the only one, for the present moment, being Mauritania, which has undergone a genuine alternation of power.

Middle Layers Under Control

Economically, while neoliberal policies have stimulated growth, they have not transformed´ these countries into dynamic elements of the global economy, and certainly have not alleviated either misery or social injustice. The oil-rentier countries, of course, are drowning in foreign exchange, but this is only thanks to the soaring price of "black gold," and it does not reflect any structural innovation in their means of production. Through instruments such as sovereign wealth funds, some of them are able to "flex their financial muscles" by acquiring pieces of large industrial countries in crisis, thus diversifying their sources of income.

However, this is only a consequence of the Global North's shortcomings and by no means a sign of successful transformation of

economic structures. As for the non-rentier Arab countries, they continue to be confronted with the serious problem of massive youth populations in poverty. The most populous of them, Egypt, has not been able to escape its own external dependencies, with foreign aid serving as a strategic rent and key source of financial support.

The new middle classes remain dependent on either the flow of oil revenues or, more generally, on clientelistic relationships that divvy out privileges and perks, which have not been broken. Whether monarchical or republican, the authoritarian state persists, showing great adaptability. Wealthy businessmen owe their networks of influence and contracts to the state; smaller entrepreneurs – even street vendors – must continue to submit to ministerial directives, fussy regulations, and the rule of bribes. Even the liberal and intellectual professions remain dependent on state institutions, and pay a high price for any transgression of the prescribed limits.

Certainly, the label "middle class" is elastic and covers a wide range of social groups, such as businessmen, teachers, nurses, shopkeepers, artists, and civil servants. Some come from well-established local or national families of old. Others are the first in their families to rise above subsistence level and emerge from illiteracy; of these, many will fall back into poverty at the first crisis. High-ranking military officers now belong to the new bourgeoisie, as holders of important assets in the national economy. Together with the senior civil servants and bureaucrats who have accumulated wealth through their positions, they constitute a sector of the "middle strata" that remains hostile to any change.

There is also a two-sided "globalized" middle layer: on the one hand, expatriate professionals and businessmen, whose support for their families back home only allows them to buy a store or other small business; and on the other hand, social groups who

are struggling with the lack of internal prospects, and for whom the only hope for economic advancement lies elsewhere – even if that elsewhere is out of reach (3). Both types of immigration are symptoms of the same deficiency, namely that states are no longer fulfilling their role as providers of jobs and social protection. Hence the loss of the individual's feeling of a link between his personal destiny and some national project shared by all.

On the ideological level, all of these groups agree in their demand for "democracy," but they are divided in a very region-specific way on this or that important issue. Since the early 1990s, the forms taken by economic and political liberalization have not been able to advance progressive, secular ideas among the middle and working classes. Islamism, in its various forms, has happened to emerge as the best spokesperson for discontent and demands for change, even among traditionally leftist and secular groups, such as students.

If secular and Islamist voices are part of the same great chorus demanding democratization, the former sing the melody of a social order based on universally accepted modern political principles and the latter chant the principles of a political order based on a set of Qur'anic precepts. The former seek to establish the sovereignty of the popular will delimited by law; the latter seek to establish the absolute sovereignty of a religious belief system. These are difficult tensions to reconcile. Even if, one can note, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood or the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) in Morocco have tentatively opined upon the question of democracy and popular sovereignty, their ideologies have a long life. Their ultimate visions remain uncertain.

In short, the "reforms" inflicted on our region over the past fifteen or twenty years – under pressure from the West – have not led to the path that would have inexorably led from economic liberalization to democracy, through modernization and secularization. On

the contrary, they have provided irrefutable proof that there is no mechanical link between these different stages.

How can we explain the seemingly paradoxical appeal of contemporary Islamism? In part, it lies in its ability to merge two themes: cultural pride and religious identity. For a long time, regimes were content to put cultural authority in the hands of conservative clerics who were thought to be in the best position to "control society." After all the blows suffered by Arab Nationalism, especially after the 1967 defeat, the collaboration of some Arab regimes with Israel, and finally the invasion and the dismantling of Iraq, the clerics have taken advantage of´ the opprobrium cast on the powers that be to pose as champions of Arab culture. The result is a powerful but disturbing ideological hybrid.

Of course, the Arabic language has a long history of rich and varied productions. But today educated, multilingual Arabs, faced with a shortage of good translations, do a significant amount of their work in English or French. By practicing these languages, they are secular. As for the youth, they catch what they can in the flow of global cultures, creating a new vernacular mishmash in the streets and on the Web. When they upload to YouTube, they are secular. At the same time, religious zealots are exerting immense pressure to combat what they call the "desecration" of the Arabic language.

Paradoxically, these pressures have the effect of weakening the position of the Arab language in the world. They aggravate the gap between this culture and those, so alive, of the West and the East, reinforcing the impression of the relative weakness of Arab knowledge. What we need, on the contrary, is for our scientists, our intellectuals, our artists, and ordinary people to use more "profane" forms that take advantage of the extraordinary power of the Arabic language.

Leaders Afraid of Their Own People

On a religious level too, this ideological hybrid is impoverishing. On the one hand, the appeal of Islam comes from its status as the last great Abrahamic religion with a salvation–oriented vision that embraces elements of secular ideologies of both the right and the left. It is anti-individualistic, anti-consumerist, and firmly rooted in community life. But socially, depending on the interpretation, it can be very conservative, rigidly hierarchical, and deferential to order and tradition. Yet it is supposed to be addressed to all, and therefore any attempt to essentialize the relationship between Islam and a particular culture (notably Arabic) runs the risk of essentializing it in a way that erodes its claim to universality. We detect the symptoms of this orientation in the diatribes of Al-Qaeda against the "Persians" or of some 'ulama against the "Turks."

Many regimes base their legitimacy on grand, quasi-mythical nationalist narratives in which they are portrayed as liberators and defenders of the nation from foreign domination, and sometimes also as defenders of the faith. These stories are often true: many dominant parties and ruling families did play a heroic role in winning and keeping national independence. Widely disseminated by the official media, though, these "unifying" mythologies have created a false identification between the regime and society, often with the enthusiastic support of intellectuals seeking to defuse dissent and encourage docility.

But, in all these grand narratives, there are always missing people: in Egypt, the Copts; in Morocco and Algeria, the Berbers; in other countries, the Kurds or the Shiites. Under the veil, social tensions were resistant to this homogenization, and the rulers were afraid of their own people, terrified of any real political opening. Some forms of authoritarianism have a populist tinge; others go so far as to celebrate the people. But underneath these paternalistic facades,

governments and elites despise the people on the grounds that they owe them independence and the gains of the nation.

Over the past two decades, the magic of these unifying ideologies has lost its power. Now the authoritarian state has to deal with a whole new set of groups, each with its own agenda of discontent, not all of which can be gagged or bought. At the same time, these groups are suspicious of each other. Militant workers will not have the same ideas as poor, conservative peasants regarding the most urgent changes needed. Local industry bosses may not like the plans of businessmen and executives linked to international financial organizations. In addition to all these divisions, there is the fear of radical Islam – a fear sometimes shared by the Islamists themselves.

Authoritarian regimes have learned to turn these divisions to their own advantage. The state no longer presents itself as a rigid defender of its right to exercise power alone over an incompetent rabble; rather, it has become the protector of "moderate" opponents against their enemy brothers, the "extremists." An Egyptian example illustrates these contradictions. As part of its neoliberal economic program, the government under Mubarak reversed Nasser's land reform, taking land from its current owners – usually former tenant farmers – and returning it to the *latifundistas*. This "reform" was supposed to be gradual, so that the peasants could adjust to the transition, but landlords bribed the police to have them evicted immediately (4). The peasants mobilized against the evictions, and one would have thought that the Islamists would have joined the movement. However, the Islamists stayed away from the movement because they approve President Hosni Mubarak's policies and consider the Nasserite reforms as "communist." Thus, the hope of mounting a serious political protest was nipped in the bud.

The "extremists versus moderates" scenario facilitates greater tacti-

cal flexibility for regimes. There is no longer a need to overtly rig elections, and most opposition parties can be allowed to participate under some restrictions. The dominant party can afford to win only 70 per cent or even 60 per cent of the vote instead of the usual 90 per cent. More voices are heard in the media – especially the print media – where the constraints are less severe than before, but the red lines are just as clear. There is no longer a need to put as many people in prison, or for as long of a time – except for "extremists," of course. The state is firing on all cylinders, creating its own media, its own non–governmental organizations (NGOs), and hence its own simulacrum of a civil society. It is a staging, a limited rationalization of the political order. The authoritarian state has not been transformed by democratization; rather, it has been dressed up with its accessories. One could, by derision, name it "authoritarianism 2.0."

Geopolitical factors influence these developments. The region has always been implicated in global politics, but one modern inflection point lay in the 1945 pact between US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Saudi King Abdelaziz Ibn Saud over the fate of Arabian oil supplies. Then, after the 1967 war, the West sought the support of Egypt and Jordan for a solution based on the creation of a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel; next came the alliance of the United States with various Arab countries, including Syria, to restore the sovereignty of Kuwait in 1991; and finally, during the 1990s, emerged all the multilateral encouragement given to Arab countries to liberalize their political life and apply neoliberal recipes to their economies.

However, since 2001, the American presidential administration of George W. Bush has opted for a new reading of the pact with the region. The priority of the US is no longer stability, but the establishment of democracy, if necessary by force. This abandonment of an old principle frightened many regimes, but Arab opinion

quickly sensed that this democratic fervor was merely camouflage for interventionism in the sole interest of the United States and Israel. Arab leaders quickly learned to decipher the contradictory statements coming from the West and regained their confidence. A democratic facade would be sufficient for them, as long as they contributed to the "war on terror" and did not oppose US hegemony or Israeli interests too vigorously.

The Terrorism Industry

These governments practiced the double standard of telling their people that they opposed foreign invasion, while at the same time helping Washington arrest Islamists, torture illegally abducted suspects, and contain resistance to this external impulse to "reshape" the region. The internationalization of the struggle – on the one hand, the US-supervised security state, and on the other jihadist militancy claimed by Al-Qaeda – has contributed´ to devaluing local political activity and demobilizing actors on the ground. Just as globalization undermines the economic power of the state and pushes citizens to move abroad to secure their material future, so the international complex created by the "war on terror" pushes activists into global and imaginary battlefields. In much of the Maghrib, we see a stark choice: to escape the despair at home, people flee to France to work or go to Iraq to fight. Many of the spectacular actions of the jihad have been led by people from elsewhere, often from countries relatively untouched by conflict like Morocco.

These mounting tides of social frustration give rise to two types of depoliticization: withdrawal and radicalization. The Algerian example is meaningful. First there was the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), with its desire to reform the state; then the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which sought to overthrow it; and finally, even more radically,

the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), transformed into Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, which "apostatized" it. Those who cannot escape must act on the spot and still claim to be part of a global organization with a good chance of being believed, even if the links with the group are tenuous at best. This is what allows Al-Qaeda to be present everywhere, since anyone can embody it.

Conversely, any disgruntled Muslim can be suspected of being a potential terrorist. The "war on terror" thereby penetrates every neighborhood. Here we must distinguish between propaganda and reality. Certainly, there are dangerous people in the world who are willing to kill and to be killed; some are driven by Islamist ideologies. But the "war on terror" has given birth to a real industry of terror, creating nightmarish fears that are totally disproportionate. According to Europol, in 2006 there were five hundred acts of terrorism in Europe, of which only one was attributable to Islamists – and that one failed (5). In a recent experiment in the United States, the Transportation Security Administration was able to fool airport security personnel with fake bombs six times out of ten – and three times out of four in Los Angeles (6). And yet, there has not been a single terrorist attack in America undertaken by Islamists since 2001. If there really were hundreds of dormant jihadist cells ready to strike, we would know.

Outside of combat zones, hence, verifiable Islamist terrorism remains rare. And within those combat zones, it is foreign invasion that has given rise to new tactics of resistance and new types of organization – including branches or imitations of Al-Qaeda. All the money, all the weapons, and all the repression in the world cannot stop a determined suicide bomber. Real threats do exist well away from combat zones, but intelligence and law enforcement agencies have proven to be successful in combating them. In sum, we now know that the goal should be to criminalize terrorism, not politicize "jihad."

Yet the terrorism industry is an integral part of the relationship between Arab regimes and the West. Money from Western foundations and "think tanks" flows in, along with political support and media visibility for all those in the region who help inflate the "war on terror" balloon. This does not increase security, but it does increase fear – and the number of control mechanisms that perpetuate authoritarian regimes. Fear of terrorism has replaced the nationalist excuses that were once used to postpone democratization indefinitely.

Democracy is undoubtedly in crisis elsewhere in the world because it has not kept its promises (7). In the Middle East, however, it is devalued before it exists: the very word is discredited. In Arab public opinion, "democracy" has become a shamed symbol of the hypocrisy of repressive regimes, of the neoconservative agenda of preemptive strikes and Western interference in general. This discrediting has even affected NGOs. Some of them have become hopelessly dependent upon foreign funding and, in the process, disconnected from local realities. The future and vision of their leaders have turned to the West actors that funds them; activism has given way to career choices. And when they do good work – like the Carter Center, which sent delegates to the January 2006 elections in Palestine – their diagnosis is simply ignored by the international community. Indeed, Western governments imposed sanctions because Palestinians voters had overwhelmingly chosen to vote for Hamas in free and fair elections, resulting in the current tragedy: one million five hundred thousand Palestinians live under siege and starvation in the Gaza Strip.

Brave but Divided Resistance

Hopes for democratization are slim. The traditional actors of change – trade unions, political activists, and students – seem

more weakened than ever. The new actors, such as regional or linguistic minorities, journalists, and independent intellectuals, are still struggling to come together and loosen the stranglehold of a long-established authoritarian policy.

We cannot predict what instruments of change will one day emerge from the growing lateral resistance. In Egypt and Pakistan, judges and lawyers are courageously resisting the destruction of judicial independence. In Morocco and Algeria, journalists are fighting for press freedom. Throughout the Muslim world, young theologians are inventing new links between Islam, democracy, and modernization.

The authoritarian state knows how to absorb and divert change, but it is not a perfect and impenetrable machine. The spaces it has created for its own maneuvers are also real fields of political action. There will be breakthroughs; expect the unexpected. In fact, most of the democratic transitions that have been observed in the world since the 2000s have occurred in "hybrid" authoritarian countries (8).

To help bring some change, the progressive message must be "indigenized," reinvigorating a sense of shared purpose, encompassing but not limited to the nation and Islam. It must present a vision that addresses people's immediate needs while involving them in larger projects of peace and democracy. US and European assistance will be gratefully received, but if the West is serious about promoting democracy, it must begin by seriously addressing local concerns. Talk of "democracy" is meaningless unless it is divorced from broader geopolitical agendas and focuses on working with local progressive movements.

People deserve to see transparent and competing viewpoints in front of them when advancing towards the future. This is their great aspiration. This is the arena in which progressives must engage.

Whatever language one uses to describe it, this is how a democratic political order will be built, both in form and substance.

Hicham Ben Abdallah El–Alaoui: El Alaoui is a scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Stanford University. This article is from a lecture given on March 11 at the Montreal Council on Foreign Relations.

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The Arab world: back to the future

Nationalism and Islamism, close connections
October 2009

Fundamentalism alarms modern secular Arabs as well as the West. But it also reflects a desire for unity which Arab nationalism tried to achieve, but failed. For people still dream of a transnational community with a shared Arab heritage.

In the Arab world, the global financial meltdown has been combined with an ongoing crisis of legitimacy which has existed in the background for decades. Whether viewed through the lens of neocolonialism or in the context of a democratic deficit or cultural and religious conflict, this crisis has proved resistant to all attempts, well intentioned or devised by authoritarian leaders, to find a solution. The absence of legitimacy is seen in gaping disparities between rulers and ruled, secularists and fundamentalists, poor and elite. With the economic crisis, these disparities could have explosive consequences.

If they are to be avoided, we in the Arab world need to relearn some of the lessons of our own history, which has many examples of heroism, unity and success under the banner of Arab nationalism, which inspired movements and individuals to transform the region. Bringing an end to colonialism was no small achievement. And it was Arab nationalism which won that battle and helped forge links between the new states of what became known as the third world.

This brand of nationalism was far from perfect. Like many reform movements, it changed its shape and lost its way. But it also gave people who were struggling for self-determination a unifying vision that made collective action possible and gave them hope of a future which would transcend individual, sectarian and national interests. Elements of that vision are still alive in the collective imagination. That is clear from the ongoing support for the Palestinian cause, especially during the recent Gaza crisis.

Western governments have constantly tried to create divisions (including through pressure on friendly regional governments). But people from the Maghreb to the Gulf, whether religious or secular, Sunni or Shia, Arab or Iranian, have shown unity in their support of the Palestinians.

Paradoxically, this desire for unity can also be seen in the appeal of various brands of fundamentalism, from quietist forms of Islam to radical Salafism. These alarm the West and modern secular Arabs, but they show the desire for a unified community with a renewed sense of purpose. If the pious umma (community of believers) has replaced the great Arab nation in the political mindset of many Muslims, and if Islamism has in many ways picked up the baton of resistance from Arab nationalism, we shouldn't be too surprised: the two are inextricably linked, in complementary as well as conflictual ways.

A pan-Arab project

In its heyday, Arab nationalism aspired to pan-Arab supranationalism: the Arab nations' fight against colonialism (*Wataniya*) would result in a new transnational solidarity of Arab peoples (*Qawmiya*), making it possible to tackle Palestine and economic development. But Arab nationalism followed an erratic path. Its highpoint came

in 1956 when Egypt, with the US and Soviet backing, thwarted the Anglo-French-Israeli attempt to take control of the Suez Canal. Its greatest setback was the Six-Day war in 1967. There was a rebound of sorts in 1973 with the Sinai war and the oil embargo, which was particularly significant since it engaged even the conservative monarchies in the pan-Arab project. But Arab nationalism degenerated into a set of discrete nationalist movements which hardened into one-party or one-leader states. Yet alongside the fierce struggles for regional dominance, people still dreamed of a transnational community with a shared Arab heritage.

In turn, political Islam has had to learn lessons from its secular nationalist cousin. Hezbollah's success in Lebanon is largely because it transcends denominational divisions and presents itself as the militant defender of Lebanese national independence. Historically, Arab nationalism has shared a number of aims with Islamist movements: the search for a unified collective consciousness, a renaissance of Arab language and culture, and anti-imperialism –which Islamists have taken up with a vengeance.

The war in the Rif in Morocco in the 1920s was an early example of an Islamo-nationalist campaign that used sharia as an anti-imperialist ideological weapon. And in the 1930s and 1940s, Abdelkarim al-Khattabi used Islamist language to promote an anti-imperialist agenda. In Algeria, the National Liberation Front (FLN) employed the language of jihad, mujahidin and sharia, especially to appeal to rural populations. The Ba'ath party often used the term umma to evoke an image of the Arab nation. Indeed, Michel Aflaq, the militant secular nationalist who founded the party, saw the intimate connections between Islam and Arab nationalism. Despite his Christian background and thoroughly secular political education, Aflaq devoted himself to a publication in memory of the Prophet in which he observed that: "The connection of Islam to Arabism

is not… similar to that of any religion to any nationalism" and prophesied that "a day will come when the nationalists will find themselves the only defenders of Islam. They will have to give a special meaning to it if they want the Arab nation to have a good reason for survival" (1).

The day Aflaq prophesied has come, though in the opposite way from what he imagined: today it is the Islamists who increasingly present themselves as the sole defenders of nationalism. Islamism has co-opted nationalism as the sign of resistance to western domination and of regional, cultural and even national independence.

No one is squeaky clean

Today Islamists score points by presenting their resistance to western cultural and political domination as the steadfast alternative to corrupt Arab regimes that have grown out of nationalist movements. But for decades, it was the West and conservative Arab governments which sought to exploit the differences between nationalism and Islamism. They did this by promoting socially conservative trends in Islam, which they perceived as bulwarks against radical nationalist movements.

The story of Islamism in relation to western domination is neither pure nor simple. Look at the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which was used by British intelligence against Nasser; or at its successor in Palestine, Hamas, which was originally nurtured by Israel as a counterforce to the secular nationalist PLO; or at the strange journey of Salafist "Afghan Arabs" who became America's army against "godless communism" in Afghanistan: Islamists have been willing to be subsidized by, and ally with, foreign powers seeking hegemony in their region.

The victory of the so-called Afghan Arabs represented the high-water mark of a kind of ersatz pan-Arab turned pan-Islamic nationalism. Islamists may claim this shows the strength of Islamic inspiration compared to the weakness of traditional secular nationalism, but it is hardly an achievement which Islamists can be proud of. After all, it demonstrates that no one has done better from an alliance with the West than the Islamists. As a former CIA agent put it, Washington's "dirty little secret" during the cold war was that it "looked on the [Muslim] Brothers as a silent ally, a secret weapon against –what else?– communism". The attitude was: "If Allah agreed to fight on our side, fine" (2). The same thing held for the Islamists in their struggle against secularism and cultural modernism: "If America agreed to fight on our side, fine." The dirty little secret in all politics is that no one is squeaky clean, and no one has been immune to the opportunistic appeal of complicity with foreign powers.

We have to get beyond these bouts of mutual recrimination. It usually ends up as a divide-and-conquer strategy that works against us and its long-term results have hardly been comforting to the West. It has corrupted and undermined the legitimacy of great nationalist movements in places like Algeria and Egypt. It has turned Islam into a doctrine of division and driven a wedge between secularists and Islamists in the Arab world, and between our region and the rest of the world. It has also fed the armed fanaticism which has turned, Frankenstein-like, upon the West.

Sunni and Shia

The latest example of this futile strategy has been the attempt to turn the ancient theological and real social differences between Sunni and Shia into a geopolitical division in which the Arab world is set against Iran. This strategy is being promoted by Israel and the

West for their own short-term goals – which is ironic since Israel and the West have historically favoured Iran over the Arab states and Arab nationalism (3). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Iran was the West and Israel's favoured nation in the region. It was the 1979 revolution that turned Iran into a bête noire and the US invasion of Iraq which destroyed the strongest remaining bastion of Arab nationalism, greatly enhancing Iran's influence.

The tension in the modern Islamic world between Sunni and Shia, and Arabs and Iranians, is not, however, a pure invention of the West. In some part of the Arab imagination, there lurks a desire to create a kind of rump Sunni nationalism – a doctrinaire Arab-led Salafism that represents Islamic purity and neo-nationalist Arab identity against a perceived threat of heretical Shiism and imperialist Persia. This dangerous tendency finds its worst expression in the vicious violence perpetrated in the name of religion in Iraq and Central Asia by various self-proclaimed al-Qaidas.

The incoherence of this strategy can be seen in how it needlessly antagonizes Iran, one of the few countries to have gained from, and helped to stabilize, the US intervention in Iraq. This incoherence is compounded by the convoluted effort to portray Hamas (an offshoot of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood) as some kind of crypto-Shia creation of Iran. The danger of this strategy is that it entices the US and its allies once again to toy with the idea of using armed Sunni groups in places such as Lebanon and Iraq.

Sunni-Shia conflict will destroy pan-Islamism as surely as national self-interest destroyed pan-Arabism. This strategy has been resisted both by regimes and the grassroots. Whatever their concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions, Arabs states have in the main insisted on addressing their concerns in the context of the region as a whole –with Israel's nuclear weapons on the table, too. And for years, from the Atlantic to the Gulf, Arabs have demonstrated their

support for Hezbollah and Hamas– not because they are Shia or Sunni, but because of their resistance to Israeli aggression. Shias support the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and Sunnis carry pictures of Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah.

The spirit of pan-Arab nationalism and pan-Islamic solidarity is reenergized by the enduring sources of discontent. Old post-colonial forms of nationalism may have become fossilized within ruling parties and elites, but in the region-wide popular movements there is a yearning for a new form of "nationalism without a nation" that can provide unity, dignity, justice and true independence throughout the Arab world.

Nationalism without a nation

Though Islamic movements are not the true fulfilment of that nationalist promise, they have reinvigorated it with a spirit of resistance and collective energy, and given voice to popular sentiment. Today's resistance movements are often led by Islamists and are helping –perhaps in spite of themselves– to revive Arab nationalism.

There is a third type of Arab "nationalism without a nation". It asserts Arab and Islamic identity but is generally secular and proud of being open to other cultures and languages. It appeals to Arab youth conversant with Al Jazeera, the internet, text messaging and video sharing. It's also to be found in the links created between the diaspora and communities back home, and in the mixing of culture and language that these create.

This new third form of nationalism has no ties to governments or regimes. Nor does it have a specific political agenda, though it shares the general features of a pan-Arab and pan-Islamist consciousness. It detests authoritarianism and corruption and seeks democracy and

the rule of law. But it firmly rejects foreign military intervention towards those ends, and western attitudes of superiority to Arab culture. While defending Arab and Islamic identity, it embraces intellectual modernism and cultural diversity. It maintains solidarity with movements for independence and justice throughout the Arab and Muslim world, including the Palestinian resistance. It's a nationalism that neither the older generation nor the imams would recognize. But it still lacks political focus and effectiveness: it doesn't yet have any coherent political organization and its voice gets drowned out amid state and Islamist pronouncements.

The idea of a pan-Arab or Islamist nationalism that would unite the region against foreign powers and bring about the economic and political liberation of its people has suffered many setbacks –from the defeat of 1967 to the persistent competition between nations, and from the occupation of Iraq to the current attempt to widen the Sunni-Shia divide. As a result, it has internalized a sense of its own failure. The result is a kind of three-way divorce– the state and its clients, secular and progressive constituencies, and Islamist groups. But it's an Italian-style divorce in which the parties still live under the same roof even though they no longer talk to each other.

Dangers of the downturn

The present economic crisis has introduced a new destabilizing element to this volatile mix, but it may offer new opportunities for progress. In the face of worsening social conditions, the Islamists lack a progressive economic agenda. What they offer –sharia– may hold some popular appeal as a means of reducing crime and corruption, and imposing order and security. But their notion of social justice is based not on politics but on charity: it is oriented toward alleviating the plight of the poor through alms, rather than

through structural change. Islamic movements are often a charitable cause for wealthy conservative donors, and are more comfortable denouncing secularized Arab states for impiety than challenging the unjust structures of property ownership. They tend to view such challenges as a form of *fitna*, promoting discord and chaos among fellow Muslims.

So, when tens of thousands of Egyptians protested against the scrapping of Nasser's popular land reforms and their holdings being returned to landlords, Islamist parties backed the state. And independent progressive activists organized the strikes and demonstrations in the Nile delta during the spring of 2008. Their demands for basic pay rises and respect for human rights won them great popular support. But the Muslim Brotherhood lent only grudging and ambivalent support: the protests were not of their making and were quite alien to their agenda. Secular reformers led similar protests in Gafsa in Tunisia and in Sidi Ifni in Morocco, and again the Islamists were sidelined.

These are not the kind of movement that Islamists generally want, or know how, to lead – not just because they imply *fitna*, but because they encourage a kind of popular empowerment that slips beyond their control. But these are exactly the kind of movements that will become increasingly vital, and will offer progressive forces new opportunities to set the agenda (4).

It's important to guard against false optimism, though. These popular protests remain rare, localized and isolated. Even when the problems cry out for national or regional solutions, demonstrators in one town often do not even know about their fellow-protesters a few hundred miles away, let alone join forces with them. And regimes do all they can to make sure that these social movements do not join forces, especially with the Islamists. Besides outright repression, regimes have become adept at asserting that they are

defenders of Arab or Islamic values against western intrusions. This helps to maintain the division between Islamists and progressives who are then trapped: their defense of women's rights, for example, gets caught between an Islamist discourse of morality and a nationalist discourse of honor.

In a particularly dangerous development, it now seems that one group of Islamists –the Pakistani Taliban– have enthusiastically embraced class conflict. In the Swat valley the Taliban have taken up the cause of land reform: some wealthy landowners from Pakistan's semi-feudal elite (and erstwhile donors) have been forced off their land and out of the country. This strategy has allowed the Taliban, as one Pakistani official put it, to "promise more than just banning music and schooling... They are also promising Islamic justice, effective government and economic redistribution." As an official warns: "I wouldn't be surprised if it swept away the established order of Pakistan" (5).

Buckle down

The message to secular progressives and moderate regimes is clear: if you don't buckle down and fix long-standing problems such as corruption, poverty and inequality, you will find yourselves way behind the Islamists.

There are, however, opportunities for real alliances that are tactically advantageous to both sides and substantively important to the people of our region, especially in the economic crisis.

The principles that will enable effective unified action will be very similar to those that motivated our historic nationalist movements: a passion for national and regional independence, a commitment to regional cooperation, an insistence on full participation in international affairs, a vision of a polity that provides political freedom

and the rule of law for all citizens, a programme for improving the economic and social lives of our populations –and an effort to respond to the aspirations of all ethnic and faith groups. The task for progressives is to win the battle for leadership and influence within these movements, and demonstrate that building democracy and respecting human rights are necessary and effective tools for putting all these principles into practice.

There are precedents: it was only after an endless succession of enormous, bloody religious and national conflicts that Europe began a process of supra-national unity. That did not entail surrendering national independence or cultural difference. The goal is not to copy the European Union, any more than it is to resurrect post-colonial Arab nationalism. It is to find a viable, democratic new way forward of our own.

Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui is a researcher at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, California

(1) "In Memory of the Arab Prophet", lecture given in Damascus on 1 April 1943.

(2) Brendan O'Neill, "Today's 'Islamic Fascists' Were Yesterday's Friends", GlobalResearch.ca.

(3) See Alastair Crooke, "The strange tale of Iran and Israel", Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, February 2009.

(4) "Egypt: Woman Detained for Promoting General Strike On Facebook, Released" (allAfrica.com, april 2008), "Egypt Facebook Groups Claim Victory Despite Strike Failure (Egypt.com, may 2008).

(5) See Jane Perlez and Pir Zubair Shah, "Taliban Exploit Class Rifts in Pakistan", The New York Times, april 2009.

The Arab world's cultural challenge

Salafism must be engaged with respect and courage
August 2010

To many, the Arab world is just a place of conflict and lack of democracy. But what is really at play are ever-changing, tacit alliances between three unequal forces: Islamists, secular intellectuals and the regimes themselves

For the last two centuries, the ulema (Islamic scholars) have always been suspicious of modern forms of cultural production and expression, which carve out spaces that engage social subjects in ways of understanding their lives and their world that are implicitly autonomous from religion. For the most part, whatever the ulema said, artistic and cultural practices have operated in a sphere that constituted a continuum, even if certain activities (modern art and painting) were more westernized and consumed mainly in effendi (westernised bourgeois) ghettos.

Underlying this wary tolerance was a theological mode of thought (kalam) in which religion encompasses more than sharia: it accommodates a pluralist notion of society as a vast ensemble where culture develops alongside religion. In this conception, a wide array of profane literary and artistic activity (poetry, calligraphy, plastic arts, music) can be understood as being in continuity with religion. In this way, diversity and creativity have remained an integral and treasured part of our history.

Part of the grandeur of Islam was its ability to absorb a myriad of cultural influences. The Muslim world protected, studied and developed the great traditions of classical literature and philosophy. It was not a place for burning books, but for building libraries to preserve them. It was, for some time, the guardian of the founding documents of what became known as "western civilization". It understood that these were a part of the intellectual legacy of all mankind.

With the rise of Islamist movements, however, a new public norm took root, often characterized as Salafist, since it is based on a narrow version of a "return" to religious orthodoxy. This new social norm is, for the most part, implicit – an unofficial ethos or ideology, only rarely enforced by legal or administrative sanction. But it is even more powerful as a result. The authority and centrality of the new Salafist norm derives not from the power of a regime, but from the fact that an unapologetic Islam has installed itself at the heart of Arab identity; it has become the central signifier of resistance to westernization and neo-colonialism.

In earlier decades, Arab nationalism fought off any such overbearing religiosity; today, "moderate" secular voices refrain from challenging it. They are caught in an identity trap, constantly limiting their discourse, in fear of being accused by religious conservatives or regimes of undermining Arab authenticity and independence –even Arab nationalism itself.

There was a striking example of this last summer, when a group of young Moroccans decided to break the Ramadan fast with a picnic in a public park. Along with the predictable reactions from religious quarters, the USFP, Morocco's main social-democrat party, also demanded punishment for the fast-breakers. This leftwing "religiosity" was couched in nationalist terms: it was an insult to national culture, and a disruption of the consensus on Moroccan

identity. The government charged the youths under a secular statute for an offence against "public order", in a way that had never been done before. This simple challenge to the Salafist norm turned out to be too radical for all the politicians.

The cultural seen as pagan

The public space is increasingly dominated by a cultural norm based on elaborating a set of strict rules, a series of dos and don'ts, read off from a strict construction of religious texts. As religion is becoming a more dominant element of public ideology, it is contracting around Salafism, creating a context in which the cultural is now more easily perceived by believers as not just profane, but pagan. A capacious understanding of Islam as a partner with culture has been shrunk into a narrow version of sharia that excludes the cultural. The passages between the sacred spaces of religion and the secular discourses of profane culture are being barricaded.

This dynamic of Salafisation occurs even as people continue to consume a proliferation of profane and secular cultural products via television, videos, the internet and popular literature. It is easy to identify the "western" and global forces driving secular culture, and denounce it as "foreign"; but this would be to ignore the creativity with which Arabs have appropriated and transformed the contemporary means of cultural production.

At the level of elite culture, there is a burgeoning patronage system for artistic modernization, financed by western foundations and transnational NGOs –but also by foundations of the Gulf. At the popular level, there is the dissemination of western media conglomerates. But there is also the growing presence of indigenous media outlets– from news sources like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, through popular soap operas and the popular literature of self-help

and romantic advice, to the explosion of musical and artistic creativity, which the internet has made possible and Arab youth have seized upon enthusiastically. In the Arab world as everywhere else, it is a prodigious cultural mash-up, whose commercialized version is the "festivalisation" of modern Arabic culture – a phenomenon in which Arab businesses, promoters and middlemen are entirely complicit (see "Arab showtime").

Most of these cultural practices are without religious intent, saturated with global influences and, to all intents and purposes, completely secular. Despite the growth of political Islam, attempts to Islamicise art and culture in the Arab world have been relatively weak and ineffective. Still, caught between the pressure for modernization from secularized global culture, and the pressure for solidarity and authenticity from the Salafised indigenous public norm, artists and cultural producers in the Arab world have taken to calling themselves "Muslim" (but not "Islamic") – even though their artistic practice has nothing to do with religion, and may be implicitly contributing to the secularization of Arab societies. By calling themselves Muslim, they are affirming an identity, not a religious practice.

Advancing schizophrenia

What is occurring in the Arab and Muslim world is a kind of schizophrenia: in private, one regularly consumes the cultural profane (via television, videos, the internet, and popular literature, or in carefully segmented semi-public spaces); in public, one proclaims one's Muslim identity, avoids going to a movie theatre, and perhaps makes a show of religiosity by attending the mosque, sporting a beard or a veil. The two forms of cultural experience unfold in parallel, but it is the religious norm that maintains hegemony in the public space. In the Arab and Muslim world today,

cultural practices produce a process of secularization, but no one may acknowledge or accept it.

This is not simply because of the social division between elites and masses. Well into the 20th century, there was a simple working compromise: westernized elites could traffic with profane culture while ordinary people stayed in the traditional cultural sphere dominated by Islam. But over the last few decades, education, literacy and the exponential growth in communication have brought profound changes. Contact with other languages and cultures has spread beyond the elite.

Today, we have increasing diversity in the Arab world: the young read novels, watch movies and videos, listen to music, read blogs –and create all of these things– in many different languages. They are not just consuming, but mastering, modern cultures that are intertwined with linguistic and cultural influences from the East, North, South –and, yes, the West.

It would be naive to presume that this diversification of mass culture will inevitably feed into movements for secularization or democratization. The same person reads novels or astrology books one day, and the next reads mass-produced religious tracts, bought in the same bookstore; or watches Ikraa (the Islamic TV chain) at lunchtime and Rotana (Saudi) after dinner.

The Salafists have adapted well to the new means of mass cultural diffusion: paperback devotional and inspirational tracts and internet blogs replace theological texts. What is important for the Salafists, as for the region's regimes, is that mass profane cultural consumption is seen as a distraction – not entirely respectable and with no implications for social or political change. One must show respect for the Salafist norm even if one does not practice it. Transgression is individual; the public norm is Salafist. This is

a form of ideological "soft" power that is far more effective than any bureaucratically enforced censorship.

There is schizophrenia in the attitude to language, too. The ulema always deemed a scholar's written work to hold the highest intellectual and social importance. The consequence, today, is a constriction in writing: an Arab intellectual does not write in the language he or she speaks. On this point, pan-Arab nationalism and Islamism agree: both insist that classical Arabic (*fosha*) is the only legitimate language for cultural expression. For pan-Arabists, *fosha* is the glue of the Arab nation; for Islamists, of the umma (community of believers). This ignores the profound divergences between actual usage (and even modern standard Arabic, the language of journalism, television, academic discourse and fiction) and fosha, which is rarely used outside of religious schools. It makes the novel a particularly suspicious genre, since it explores "existential" questions of life and its meaning; the novel is not just independent of religion, it reinvents the Arabic language far beyond the limits of *fosha*.

The same ambivalence governs law. Each Arab state has its own legal code, but almost all refer to sharia as the ultimate source of law. Each state defines its own version of legality and "Islamicity", and does so for the most part by incorporating some secular principles of rights and justice; but none can refuse to acknowledge the primacy of sharia. The primacy of the Islamic norm governs the Arab polity at the moment. This norm maintains itself as the public standard of judgment, yet it does not always define or determine the real practices of courts and the law.

Policing piety

By accepting Salafisation in everyday mores (requiring or encouraging the Islamic headscarf, suppressing cinema, etc.), the

modern authoritarian state can renew its alliance with the ulema – the official, state-sanctioned guardians of Islam, who are more interested in exchanging favors with regimes than reforming them. It can tolerate (while officially keeping at arm's length) quietest Islamist currents whose sharia programme consists mainly of mobilizing religious ideologues (not agents of the state) who will obsessively police piety within the community. A modern state can act against the harshest sharia penalties (e.g. stoning women who have been raped), but let the primacy of Salafism remain unchallenged.

Yet many secular intellectuals, who would otherwise pursue democratic reforms, end up relying on protection from the authoritarian state against the ulema or the fundamentalists; and find themselves having to defend it in return. To them, the state is the lesser evil to Islamism, protecting present spaces of cultural autonomy and the possibility of future liberalization. For example, many secular intellectuals reluctantly supported the Algerian state during its struggle with the Islamists in the 1990s. Conversely, today in Egypt, the state protected the writer Sayyid al-Qemni after a fatwa against him (and in June 2009 gave him a medal).

The state can even enter into implicit covenants with some militant Islamist currents judged less of a threat than the Muslim Brotherhood. It may even grant such groups parliamentary status as tolerated opposition. This enables the regime to crack down more harshly on jihadists or other Islamists contesting state power.

Brain drain

The precarious equilibrium among these contending social actors works to the advantage of the state, free to maintain a programme of harsh, but now more finely targeted, repression – all while reinforcing the Salafist norm.

Among intellectuals, this frustrating situation can produce various forms of political withdrawal. There is a real and virtual brain drain: many Arab artists and intellectuals live and work outside of their home countries. They might identify themselves as Arab and Muslim, rather than Egyptian or Tunisian, as they assert an identity whose founding elements are very close to those of Salafism: the Arabic language is *fosha* and to be Arab is inseparable from being Muslim. Intellectuals in geographic or ideological diaspora lose touch with their specific national and social base and become generic "Arab" intellectuals.

This withdrawal to the abstract unity of a virtual international community is exacerbated by the poor support intellectuals often receive from their state economies. The lack of support has led to a cultural milieu that is individualistic and depoliticized, looking for foreign audiences and funding. This external patronage has been forthcoming from western organizations like the Ford Foundation, as well as the philanthropy of Gulf personalities. As a result, we now see an increasing number of cultural artefacts, representing an abstract Arab/Muslim identity, produced for, and appearing in, western galleries and Gulf showcases.

In the realm of fiction alone, we now have multiple competitions for the best examples of "Arab" culture: The Emirates Foundation International Prize for Arabic Fiction (known as (the "Arabic Booker"), the Blue Metropolis Al Majidi Ibn Dhaher Arab Literary Prize (Lebanon), and the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (managed with the Booker Prize Foundation in London).

There is nothing wrong with this, or with the potential for the greater integration of artists in our region into cultural developments throughout the world. But it is troubling that, as the status of the "Arab" artist rises among international audiences, he or she can become more disconnected from people at home, and less valuable to them.

Internet generation

The internet has fostered new spaces of cultural production and consumption. But while it can contribute to the growth and efficacy of a politicized protest movement, it does not in itself create political awareness. As we have seen in Egypt and Iran, it is an effective new tool in mobilizing, but cannot substitute for the kind of grassroots organizing required for serious struggle.

Jihadis use the internet most inventively and effectively for organization and propaganda. Their Salafism has no problem with the technological aspects of modern culture –perhaps because they distinguish between the praiseworthy "thinker" (*moufakir*) versus the reviled "intellectual" (*mouthakkaf*).

The internet also contributes to isolation and segmentation. Users tend to form discrete groups who communicate exclusively –and often anonymously– through their screens, continually reinforcing a closed discursive loop. Anonymity allows dissenters to ratchet up their radicalism, while avoiding open confrontation and escaping any harsh consequences. Through the internet, it is easy to mock power, and avoid the real world.

Artists and intellectuals no longer (except in places like Iran and Turkey) spearhead movements for social, political and cultural change. They have become, rather, a kind of "court" faction, protected and tolerated by the state or by powerful and wealthy patrons, international and indigenous. The earlier contestatory figure of the artist, like the Egyptian writer, Sonallah Ibrahim, or the Moroccan musical group, Nass El Ghiwane, has largely disappeared. For example, the avant-garde Egyptian painter, Farouk Hosni, is now President Mubarak's minister of culture. Hannane Kessab Hassan, translator of Jean Genet, was chosen by Syria's prime minister in 2008 to direct the Unesco-sponsored programme "Damascus, Arab

Capital of Culture". Artists like Wael Chawqi (featured in the Alexandria Biennial) and Hala El Koussy (winner of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize from the Gulf) are not engaged in political contestation, however modern their ideas on culture and society.

Modernizing cultural movements in the Arab world have real progressive potential. Those involved in them gain a symbolic transnational capital. They can try to influence trends within their own society, using this capital. Since regime manipulation is not perfect, in ceding new spaces of cultural autonomy and experimentation a process is unfolding that, in the long term, could foster a new type of opposition to authoritarian rule in the Arab world.

One thing is certain. If artistic and intellectual practice is to have an effect on democratization, it will be necessary to engage the Salafist paradigm on its home ground, and present a credible and consistent alternative. This is not a matter of adopting anyone else's prefabricated model. We must first of all reconnect with the Arab and Islamic tradition that built spaces for cultural autonomy over centuries. A new cultural norm, appropriate to the contemporary world as well as our own traditions, means engaging the Salafist model with respect, but also with courage.

Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui is a board member of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies; scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Stanford University; chairman of the board of the Center on Climate Change and the Challenge to Human Security, University of California; and advisor to Human Rights Watch

Arab showtime

Salafism must be engaged with respect and courage
August 2010

The segmentation of Arab culture culminates in its festivals. These are a commercialized, middlebrow corollary to elite cultural projects. They focus on Arab identity and the Arab world, and promote secular, modern, western-friendly sentiments. A proliferation of commercialized, Arab-themed cultural celebrations and festivals – both traditional and contemporary – provide new outlets for artists and new vehicles for satisfying, and selling to, the cultural tastes of modernized Arab middle classes.

It is also the culmination of a privatization process: states have handed art over to the private sector (while preserving the prerogative to police it). State budgets for culture have been cut, with some of the funds channeled to tourism. Festivals and galas, designed to show the modern, secular, festive face of the country concerned, attract a panoply of sponsors: corporate (banks, airlines, hotels, media), private (including princely and royal foundations, and private individuals), and governmental (especially tourism ministries).

These festivals reach their zenith at Baalbek in Lebanon, and Mawazine and Fez in Morocco, showcasing a wide range of musical and artistic talent far outside any recognizable Salafist norm. The Fez festival bills itself as "sacred music of the world", but shows un-Islamic genres such as American gospel music.

These elaborate celebrations are multi-day events, drawing international audiences, from Europe, the Arab world and beyond. They are a means of building bridges from the sacred to the profane – but in a highly commodified and controlled way, which will not leak into the cultural diet of ordinary people.

Egypt catches Tunisia's fire

The Arab wall begins to fall

February 2011

The uprising in Egypt, sparked by the successful Tunisian revolt, and the other protests across the Arab world, show that repression is failing. Which Arab regimes may fall next, and why?

In mid-January the Tunisians deposed a despotic regime that had become a kleptocracy, based on theft and corruption, and a repressive autocracy. The ruling family had despoiled Tunisia and made it one of the least free countries even among the dictatorships of North Africa and the Middle East.

This heroic uprising began when a young man reduced to selling fruit from a barrow set himself alight after the authorities confiscated his produce because he had no licence. It was successful because it was unpredictable and had no real political leadership or structure. Had it been more structured, the regime would probably have crushed it. The insurgents' only common ground was exasperation with Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. They communicated over the internet, in ways that the regime failed to foresee (in spite of the precedent of Iran's 2009 Green Movement, defeated by the mullahs), and overthrew it in less than a month. But what gave the revolt its strength was also its weakness. Without a leader or political programme, the Tunisians could overthrow the president but not take charge of the country.

Tunisia has one of the best-educated and most secular populations in the Arab world and, until now, has been able to prevent radical Islamists from gaining the upper hand; recent developments are not likely to allow them a chance to seize power by force. If, at a later date, Islamist parties such as the Nahda (1) are willing to take part in the democratic process, it will be important to integrate them into the political system, and make sure radical Islamists are marginalized.

After the fall and flight of Ben Ali, there was uncertainty because there was no autonomous political elite capable of taking over power and supervising the transition to a democratic regime. Tunisia was left with political parties still in their infancy, trade unions deprived of their leaders, and key figures from the fallen regime. If fear of chaos, confidence in society's ability to govern itself and political realism persist, a political structure could emerge. Tunisia's young people will be an asset to a society that wants democracy and has managed to rid itself of a dictatorship without large-scale loss of life.

As the first elections approach, will Tunisia's new leaders try, once again, to use fear of Islamism to persuade western governments that popular sovereignty should be set aside? Those who have just come to power are scared of the people in the street. It is possible that the transitional government, as eager to avoid violence as to hold on to some of the power of the fallen president, will try to preserve the status quo to some extent. By organising elections at an early date, it risks giving greater prominence to members of the discredited elite, who could band together to usurp the reform ticket.

This is what happened in the 1990s in Bulgaria and Romania, where the former regime joined with the old elites and returned to power under a new guise. In the Ukraine, the break with the past was more radical (it led to the formation of a new state), but the old political elite was back in business as soon as the fuss died down.

The common factor is that the fall of the hated regime quickly appeased the people, a problem in any transition where there is a lack of civil society organization.

Hope spreads

The January uprising in Tunisia has fed the hopes of other Arab populations. These hopes of freedom quickly spread to Egypt, and also to Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Yemen and even Palestine, where a new generation, weary of authoritarian governments, despaired of ever being rid of them. But, because it was unforeseeable, the Tunisian experience could not be reproduced in exactly the same way in the rest of the Arab world.

In Tunisia, the armed forces were relatively independent of the intelligence and security services, including the police. They were often badly paid (apart from the presidential guard), but they knew how to manage revolts on a limited scale, stifling them at birth. They did not know how to cope with an uprising that had very little organization and involved many layers of society.

Unlike the Algerian regime, which was collegial (rather than concentrated in a single person), the Tunisian dictatorship was a clear target for public condemnation, since almost every member of the Ben Ali family was involved in the corruption. Diffuse dictatorships are harder to dislodge than those with a figurehead, such as Mubarak in Egypt, the shah in Iran, Suharto in Indonesia. Oligarchic coalitions have broader foundations than personal dictatorships, and are more stable. Authoritarian regimes can actually be tougher if they concede part of their power to the people, especially to different interest groups. The Moroccan and Algerian regimes have created far wider and more complex interest networks than Tunisia. In Algeria, oil revenues have created a political clientele with a direct interest in keeping the current regime in power.

The Tunisian regime turned elections into depressing referendums –it won 99.27% of the votes in 1989, 99.91% in 1994, 99.45% in 1999, 94.49% in 2004 and 89.62% in 2009, shutting out the opposition. There was no real political scene in Tunisia.

This is not the case in Egypt, where the electoral system, though distorted by massive fraud, has remained a forum for protest and confrontation. The press has not been as tightly muzzled in Egypt as it was in Tunisia. Nor is it in Algeria, where oil revenues make it possible to defer the radicalization of public anger as long as the military hierarchy is able to remain united, keep a low profile on the political scene and co-opt any political players willing to be subjugated. A civil war that lasted more than a decade left the Algerians drained and with little inclination to rise up against a regime that triumphed over radical Islamism at a cost of 100,000 lives.

In Morocco, public resentment has not so far been directed at the monarchy. But the young there, frustrated by a lack of prospects, exclusion from politics, a coercive security apparatus and crushing clientelism, are not short of reasons to revolt. With Morocco's complexity, the revolt could become radicalized: the ethnic divisions are deeper and more numerous, and the process of homogenization less advanced than elsewhere in the Maghreb.

Invisible flaws

The regimes in all these countries are "strong" because civil society is weak, as a result of economic development models that lack dynamism, because there is clientelism in the state apparatus and vigorous state control of the population, because of deep inequalities and a general exclusion from politics. But the slightest chink in a regime's armor will be exploited by dissidents.

In Tunisia, the fragile regime, under stress and with no legitimate

title to power, was ripe for the picking. Yet Ben Ali's regime had been considered one of the strongest and most stable in the region. The flaws were invisible, and what happened was unforeseeable.

Other regimes are not so fragile. Yet their longevity makes them easy targets for movements that are hard to imagine today but which, in retrospect, may seem as inevitable as Tunisia's uprising. The ease with which the regime fell to Tunisia's youth shows repressive regimes cannot overcome movements that spring up from nowhere.

The Tunisian revolt was fuelled by disparities in development between different regions. The coast has enjoyed large-scale investment to promote tourism, but the interior has been neglected, and that was where the revolt started. There are disparities in other Arab countries, which take other forms. A society whose political system is monopolized by a very small group with no legitimate title to power cannot develop rationally without an autonomous technocracy on the Chinese model. But in most Arab countries the technocracy has been paralyzed by corruption and authoritarianism.

The streets are full of black marketeers (see Algeria: North African perestroika starts here) and bewildered young, many university graduates, trying not to be noticed. They may be hittistes or unemployed workers (2) (and potential converts to Islamism), or simply victims of a system that denies them the chance to live in dignity. Their despair may find an outlet as it has done in Egypt and Algeria (and fade slowly after failing to achieve anything) or it may persist as smouldering resentment (as in Jordan and Morocco). Regimes are often unaware that their stability rests on the apathy of a society that no longer has the strength to revolt. When the anger finally explodes, it is all the more violent. As long as the despair of the young does not erupt, these regimes will be safe.

But even a "minor incident", such as a young man's suicide by fire, can be enough to make a whole country rise at local, then at regional level, and end the regime.

The influence of Tunisia on the rest of the Arab world will depend on whether the country can be democratised. If that succeeds, democracy will probably spread, especially to the other Maghreb countries. Public pressure will grow stronger; the key demands will be pluralism and the right to participate. If it fails, neighbouring authoritarian regimes will be strengthened and their populations will despair. Most Arab regimes would prefer the second option, even if it leads to chaos.

The regimes must choose

Either the Arab regimes listen to their peoples' demands and start to open up politically, or they try at all costs to maintain their hold on power without giving in to demands for participation.

If they opt for democracy, they will find many obstacles on their path. After several decades of closure and repression, the Arab regimes need to open up gradually to avoid a head-on collision that could lead to their overthrow. The opening-up would have to be generous enough not to be regarded as a bluff, and gradual enough not to tip the political system into revolution. But gradual change requires a delicate touch and the cooperation of a political elite that would sacrifice neither stability nor the urgency of democratization. It is doubtful whether the current regimes would be able to convince such an elite and give it enough power to accomplish its mission.

Or they may try to close up politically. Learning from Tunisia, authoritarian Arab regimes may seek to neutralize the immediate causes of revolt, by trying to bring down the prices of essential

foods (bread, sugar, meat, eggs). They may also try to improve their security and intelligence services.

In Tunisia, the internet provided a safe refuge for dissidents, who communicated via YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. (Tunisia was also weakened by poor cooperation between police, secret service and army.) But, as we have seen in Egypt, Arab regimes, inspired by the way that Iran has crushed social movements, have already learned to filter and block the internet (and other communications, including mobile phone networks). They may expel foreign journalists or place them under house arrest, and try to stifle urban uprisings by dividing districts and establishing bridgeheads able to intervene at a local level, on the model of the Basij in Iran (3). In other words, they may try to modernize and extend their means of repression. But, as we are seeing in Egypt, this cannot protect them against collective actions that new social movements may invent. Repression is at best only a short-term solution.

Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui is a board member of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies; scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Stanford University; chairman of the board of the Center on Climate Change and the Challenge to Human Security, University of California; and adviser to Human Rights Watch.

(1) A cultural and political renaissance movement that emerged in the late 19th century. It seeks to reform Islam and transform society.

(2) From hitt (Arabic for "wall"): an unemployed worker who spends all day leaning against a wall.

(3) A youth volunteer organization that is part of the Pasdaran Army (informal name for the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution).

Are the Arab monarchies next?

Arab spring, act two

January 2013

As the chaotic transition towards democracy continues in North Africa and Yemen, the fighting in Syria is intensifying. And, less noticed, opposition to the Arab monarchies is growing.

The Arab Spring is not an outcome, it is a process. For those countries at the forefront of regional transformation, the fundamental question is can democracy become institutionalized? Though progress has been uneven and the outcomes of many state-society struggles have yet to be resolved, the answer is a cautious yes. In at least a few countries, we are witnessing the onset of democratic institutionalization: whether the process of reform and transformation spreads to other parts of the Middle East depends on many factors –religious tensions, political mobilization, regime adaptations, geopolitics. Meanwhile North Africa provides the most promising preview of the future.

Democratic institutionalization means the healthy convergence of politics around three arenas of competition: elections, parliaments and constitutions. When these institutions are robust and durable, then the democratic governments they engender are relatively safe from radical groups, reactionary forces and authoritarian backsliding (due to alternation: democracies that uphold the rule of law

and hold regular elections require that power alternates between competing parties).

In Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, this process is unfolding, if at an unsteady pace (1). All three have had founding legislative elections that were far more competitive and pluralistic than those held in their authoritarian past. In Tunisia, the project to re-craft the national constitution nears completion by the Constituent Assembly, which itself was the product of electoral competition. The crisis there has two dimensions: the new government's passivity in response to Salafist violence (which came to an end after the attack on the US embassy in Tunis) and the delay in getting economic reform under way, especially in the poorest regions. In spite of often acute tensions and conflicts between different political interest groups, all but the tiniest minority have accepted that democracy is now the name of the game.

In Libya, the post-Gaddafi political order has been rockier, with armed militias initially fighting amongst themselves (2), while in Egypt, presidential elections resulted in the ascension of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi. Once in office, Morsi asserted civilian power over the military by dismissing Field Marshall Tantawi. This was a crucial step towards redefining civilian-military relations in a historically praetorian state.

In these transitional states, most political actors recognise the new reality –except of course hardliners and extremists, such as some Salafists and defenders of the autocratic past. But the new reality does not mean that these institutionalising democracies will become liberal democracies. The democrats of the Arab Spring did not embrace revolution to advance liberalism– which many in the West may see in the Arab context as advancing the cause of gender equality, unshackling censorship of pornography and other "immoral" materials, and otherwise widening the boundaries of

expression. Liberalism is in truth a body of political thought that may give preeminence to the individual and freedom, but can only emerge from a later stage of democratic consolidation. It will not result from an early showdown between secularists and Islamists, and compromise on such values at this nascent stage is unlikely.

The priority for these transitioning states is not ideational, but rather the continued struggle towards institutionalization. Democracy does not require that every citizen and every party embrace the same ideological framework, but rather that democratic rules and procedures become the definitive rules of the game. Even the Islamists are discovering that electoral triumphs require more than slogans: like democratic governments elsewhere, they need to deliver the goods through governance and policy, not empty promises of bliss and orthodoxy.

The Islamist apparition

From America to Europe, policymakers and publics alike were shocked to see Islamist parties like the Nahdha movement in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt emerge as winners of revolutions they did not trigger. However, fears of Islamisation must be tempered by several realities.

Western observers often forget that Islamists have no symbolic monopoly over the interpretation of Islam in the public sphere. In Egypt, classical educational institutions like Al-Azhar University and doctrinal sects like the Sufis frame faith and politics in ways distinct from Islamists. Within the broad Islamist category, the Brotherhood and more hardline Salafists clash over major issues and disagree about numerous religious tenets. The decentralized and horizontal freedom given by Islam to the individual believer ironically sabotages those who seek to dominate religion for their own political gain.

And though the Islamist trend encompasses groups ranging from social service providers to extreme Salafist voices, its mainstream face that will shape politics in most transitional countries –the Muslim Brotherhood– is no revolutionary vanguard. The Brotherhood did not support Iran's call for Islamic revolution against the region's secular dictatorships after 1979. Nor did they embrace Osama bin Laden's call to replace politics with jihad in the late 1990s.

Third, Islamist victories have hardly been sweeping, so Islamism cannot be taken as the unambiguous voice of the Arab masses. The Muslim Brotherhood, and to a lesser degree the Salafists, dominated the first post-Mubarak elections by winning over 300 out of 500 parliamentary seats. Yet their popularity has faded since 2011, and the result of the June 2012 presidential contest was stunning: Morsi barely achieved victory over Ahmad Shafik, a symbol of the old autocracy who secured nearly half the popular vote.

Similarly, the Nahda Party controls 40% of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly –not enough to survive without a coalition with power-ful secular and leftist forces. In Libya, the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party barely won 10% of seats in the June 2012 elections for the General National Congress.

Many Islamists are being transformed by the democratic process of inclusive contestation, however reluctantly they entered this new arena. In Egypt, how to integrate the well-organized Muslim Brotherhood and its more hardline Salafist cousins into the long-term democratic game takes precedence. The reality is that Islamists cannot take power by force; the Brotherhood is a well-mobilized social movement but it lacks coercive muscle.

The September 2012 uproar over the anti-Islam film The Innocence of Muslims provides yet another way to poke holes in the Islam-ist apparition. The episode forced wider Islamist forces to put a

clear distance between themselves and the more radical groups. And many leaders protested against the film by invoking such legal concepts as defamation rather than resorting to the canon of sharia law's proscription of blasphemy.

The secular pretext

Still, it would be remiss to ignore that the central message of many Islamists is to implement the pillars of Islam more strongly in Arab-Muslim societies in accordance with sharia. The Brotherhood is no liberal organization and for that reason, many secularists have become fearful of theocracy should they attain complete power. The key is to remember that the Islamist majority, represented by the Brotherhood and other mainstream groups, can "internalise" democratic norms in a way that preserves the importance of religious identity while still preserving the institutional rules of electoral competition and consolidating the gains made through regime transition. One does not need a cadre of western-educated liberal ideologues to create democracy: democracies emerged without democrats in Portugal and Spain in the 1970s, and then much of Latin America throughout the 1980s as what Samuel Huntington called the Third Wave of Democratization unfolded (3). The logic of democracy is agreeing to disagree within an institutional ecology bounded by accountability and pluralism –because the alternative is perpetual instability, conflict and stalemate.

Once democracy institutionalizes, so that most political groups can accept the inviolability of elections and participation, citizens and politicians can engage in civic debates about transforming state and society into more (or less) liberal forms. This means that countries like Libya, Tunisia and Egypt need not be thoroughly "secularized" to quicken their transitions to democracy. Secularism almost never preceded democracy in the western experience.

Youth protesters –mostly urban, largely middle-class, and decidedly secular in the sense of not being members of any Islamist group– led the regional wave of revolutions. Today though, these youth movements have been marginalized in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, and with it their particular vision of a more secular democratic future, because they failed to organize a cohesive political front once authoritarianism collapsed. Whereas Islamists took advantage of the resulting vacuum to mobilize (with varying electoral results), the youth movements refused to enter formal institutional politics.

This has had destructive consequences. By emphasizing "the street" (the idea that grievances should be expressed by loud contentious protests rather than the quieter, more structured rules of electoral politics), these secular youths have gained little formal power and virtually no representation in new democratic institutions such as parliaments and popular councils.

Street politics have a dual function. They allow ordinary people to serve as civic watchdogs of the state (the January 25 Revolution in Egypt happened only because students, workers and other middle-class citizens could crowd into urban centers in defiance of central authority and demand more rights). However, constant protesting cannot replace the institutional rhythms of democratic elections and political campaigns, because the very act of protest implicitly rejects the legitimacy of the system –and democracy consolidates only when most accept its legitimacy.

What these youths must do to prolong their contribution to the Arab Spring is to align their interests with nascent institutions. The time has come to invest their energies, and the spirit of their activism, into formal politics such as parliaments and consultations. They can also act as surrogates for a new political scene that encourages the expression of religious opposition, nationalist tendencies, secular

trends and centrist or centre-left values that span the entire spectrum of society. Uncontrolled, street protests can even undermine the best of policies. Unless these popular interests can be institutionalized into the system, there is a danger that a well-organized minority could rise to power, silence the moderate majority and slide the state back into authoritarian practices. This is a recurrent theme in the aftermath of the Third Wave of Democratization: autocrats often find ways to subvert new democratic institutions. The greatest danger in the Arab world is not a return to the old model of personalistic dictatorships, whose time has passed; rather, it is the rise of new authoritarian systems based upon oligarchic coalitions that manipulate democratic institutions.

Those left behind

Like all moments of historical change, the Arab Spring has created as many losers as winners. The secular youth movements discussed earlier are a prominent example. Yet another losing faction is the intellectual elite class, who have repeated the mistakes of their predecessors in failing to link the concrete concerns of localities and communities with their academic ideologies and grand visions.

Since the advent of Arab nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, generations of educated elites have spoken in favour of progressive issues that have electrified the press and wooed the middle classes. Early on, many of these themes were oppositionist (against Zionism, imperialism, Orientalism, capitalism and other perceived threats). There were also positive demands for pan-Arabism, regional justice and equality with the West. Arab intellectuals are far more progressive than their societies but remain crippled by their inability to organize at the grass-roots level and translate their social influence into concrete political parties.

Another reason for the intellectual elite's marginalization is that their discourse of opposition could not fathom the possibility of an indigenous revolution. Their longstanding accusations that Zionism and western imperialism were the dual threats oppressing the Middle East were disproved when it became clear that the real problem was not the outside world, but the durability of authoritarianism and the lack of good governance. Some intellectuals today have reacted so extremely to the dashing of their expectations that they now believe the Arab Spring to be a western or Israeli conspiracy: with the defeat of the Ba'ath regimes of Iraq and perhaps of Syria next, the last vestiges of pan-Arab nationalism will have disappeared.

Another reason why youth movements and the intellectual elite have failed to capture mass support is that some of them have become extremely hardline in their opposition to any form of Islamism; they have become secular fundamentalists who cannot fathom the possibility of allowing even the most moderate Islamists to play a marginal role in governance.

A third set of losers is the Arab monarchies. This may seem contradictory. After all, no kingdom fell during the Arab Spring, and indeed a common refrain in the western press has been that, compared to their republican counterparts, the autocratic monarchies of the region have proven exceptionally resilient in the face of social unrest. The reasoning encompasses two arguments: these royal regimes enjoy a deeply rooted sense of cultural legitimacy that resonates throughout their societies. Unlike other authoritarian leaderships, they retain traditional acceptance with the public given their presence before or during anti-colonial struggles. Also, they are more adaptable, having a very flexible set of institutional tools with which to manipulate politics that go beyond mere repression.

However, the monarchies are running on borrowed time, and most are in worst straits than a decade ago. In Bahrain, for example, a mass uprising was stopped only through the combined efforts of the national security forces and the Gulf Cooperation Council's military intervention. Morocco faced serious protests as well. There, the promise of constitutional revisions temporarily quieted public anger, but by accepting integration without meaningful political reform, the Islamist Justice and Development Party –the face of parliamentary opposition– now risk losing credibility like the rest of the political class. Moreover, the urban-rural divide is no longer salient; dissent is now everywhere, and demands for change have cut across old class and provincial lines.

Like Morocco, the Saudi monarchy is thickly embedded in society. Blessed by geology, it has used its enormous oil revenues to offset overt opposition with new welfare and development programmes, which has allowed the regime to defer more fundamental structural reforms. The opposite is true in oil-rich Kuwait. There, constant street protests against corruption and royal meddling have under-mined the Al-Sabah family and the December 2012 elections were boycotted by the opposition. This tug-of-war between the monarchy and parliament has culminated in a critical juncture: either the regime accepts a prime minister who is a commoner, and thus beyond the emir's control, or it must shut down parliament and backslide to authoritarianism at a very high cost.

In Jordan, the monarchy has become suffocated by two complemen-tary forces. The Islamists want to preserve the monarchy, because the collapse of monarchical rule would allow Israel to portray the East Bank as the new alternative homeland for all Palestinians and thus justify the annexation of the whole of the West Bank. Yet they also desire constitutional monarchy, with greater political freedoms. The monarchy's Bedouin tribal bedrock has become restless due to

rising unemployment and corruption, which allows them to accuse the regime of favouring the wealthier Palestinian majority.

Vested interests run deep in monarchies, because dynastic families develop resilient connections to influential social and political groups that provide support in exchange for patronage, such as merchants, businessmen, farmers, tribes, and the ulama. Drastic reforms that replace absolute monarchy with real parliamentary governance would undercut not just royals but their commoner clients too. Second, the post-colonial and post-cold war history of the region shows that monarchs have an aversion to transforming their executive power into moral authority; they will only consider constitutional monarchism after exhausting all other options and strategies. So, without a concerted popular challenge, kingships have no incentive to bring anything more than cosmetic reforms to the bargaining table.

Once championed as moderate and adaptable regimes, the Arab monarchies now risk squandering a golden opportunity. Though they would have to surrender much power in a democratic transition, their institutions also have much to contribute in helping unify their societies during times of crisis and spare future conflict and instability.

The paradox

The geopolitical dimension of the Arab Spring has created a stunning paradox. Consider how it began: as a primarily local and then national-level phenomenon, it made itself heard as a call for justice and dignity by encouraging citizens to resist authoritarian brutality. Within months, it had morphed into a second stage of regionalisation. No longer a purely domestic act, it spread a common set of principles and values across borders. This diffusion transcended the

well-known "Al-Jazeera effect" because it encompassed not simply new forms of communication but an entirely new framework of contentious activism. This new regional discourse, shared through social technologies and strengthened with every media broadcast, drew upon classic concepts of pan-Arab unity but rejected any firm ideology in favour of a more simple and shared frustration for authoritarian governance, and a powerful yearning for citizenship.

We are now, however, at a third stage in which this regional wave has become internationalized along sectarian and geopolitical cleavages; the Arab Spring now represents not just domestic and regional politics but also an international arena of confrontation. The Bahraini uprising began this process in spring 2011, when the sectarian nature of its Shia-dominated opposition put the ruling Sunni monarchy in the camp of larger fellow Sunni countries and its western allies, a strategic front led by Saudi Arabia, the US and Turkey, not to mention less overt intervention from Israel. Inversely, the popular opposition was associated with the "radical" transnational Shia bloc of Iran, Syria and Hezballah. The Syrian civil war accelerated this process but through an inverse dynamic. There, it was social opposition that became associated with the "moderate" camp of Sunni powers and their western allies, while the embattled autocratic regime of Bashar al-Assad entrenched its position with the transnational Shia alliance.

In 2012 these sectarian and geopolitical dimensions reinforced each other in an iterative way, giving the Arab Spring truly global implications. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the US and Israel do not want Iran, Syria and Hezbollah to gain strategic predominance in the region. This rivalry has nearly transformed the sectarian division from simmering tensions to imaginary warfare with potentially dangerous consequences. Extremely polarizing characterizations prevail, as many in the West now describe the Sunni states –especially the

monarchies– as bulwarks of stability and moderation, whereas the Shia are extremists, destabilizing and militant. Needless to say, this conflict also serves the domestic interests of its proponents.

Once internationalized, the geopolitical echo of the Arab Spring has however returned to the domestic level of democratizing states like a boomerang, and in a manner few could have predicted. Iran, Syria and Hezbollah have attempted to force the transitional regimes of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt to make the hard choice of joining their camp, while the pro-western Sunni alliance has also exerted pressure to win over these new regimes and their foreign policy alignments. Paradoxically, such exogenous strains have only strengthened these new regimes by convincing them to adopt a neutral foreign policy stance and take more seriously the process of institutionalization. The threat of regional instability has rejoined their internal efforts to bolster domestic stability. For instance, Morsi's much-publicized presentation at the Non-Aligned Movement meeting in Iran last August showed that Egypt was taking a modest stance in the region.

In comparative terms, the new regimes in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt are creating a restrained position that rejects sectarian incitement, extreme religious interpretations and geopolitical entanglements in favour of flexibility and pragmatism. Above all, they desire domestic stability, and they see these two competing sides as obstacles in the course of building new democratic political orders.

This paradox (that international conflict can bolster the stabilization of democratic politics at the domestic level) is quite novel in modern Middle East history. In the past, systemic battles pitted the West and its Arab allies against ideological coalitions framed as destructive and subversive to the region (the communist threat posed by Nasser and Brezhnev, Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolutionary creed, Bin Laden's jihadist campaign). The current

regional alignment is far more nuanced. Even at its peak, no outside actor could frame the Arab Spring as a coherent ideological flood associated with any evil empire, opposing superpower or radical organization. It grew as an indigenous force before becoming entangled in geopolitics.

The confrontation between Sunni and Shia will be crucial to the future. However much it may be manipulated from outside, it is a clash which is likely to multiply the fault lines and cloud the horizon of the Arab Spring.

Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui is a board member of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies; scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Stanford University; chairman of the board of the Center on Climate Change and the Challenge to Human Security, University of California; and adviser to Human Rights Watch.

(1) See Alain Gresh, "Gulf Cools Towards Muslim Brothers", Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, November 2012.

(2) See Patrick Haimzadeh, "Libyan democracy hijacked", Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, October 2012.

(3) Samuel P Huntington, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1991.

Take back the Arab Spring

Syria, Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia:
Four paths of revolution

February 2014

It is three years since popular movements in the Arab world made it clear that the future could not be like the past. Despite the horrors, religious infighting and foreign interference, Arabs now see themselves as citizens not subjects, and demand dignity and a proper voice.

At its onset, the Arab Spring shattered western assumptions about the Middle East. It upended Orientalist views that saw Arabs as incapable of conceiving democracy, and it dismissed the belief that authoritarian rule was the best form of government in the region. Three years later, the clouds have gathered. No one knows how the process may end as we now enter its fourth phase.

The first phase, which consumed 2011, was a broad, diffused wave of ideas about dignity and citizenship driven by spontaneous protests. The second phase, in 2012, saw domestic structural factors and historical legacies begin to make each struggle conform to its own national context. And outside forces began to reconfigure those conflicts in more destructive directions.

During this past year we have witnessed the third phase, with the deepening internationalization of the Arab Spring. Geopolitically,

regional and western powers have projected their strategic interests through increasingly aggressive means. The narrative of sectarian strife between Sunni and Shia Islam has spread throughout the region, categorizing each state and society along the polarizing axis of religious identity. The ideological clash between Islamism and secularism has widened in many countries too, with each platform of beliefs claiming to provide the best vision for political order. The danger lies when these geopolitical rivalries and sectarian tensions overtake the specificities of each country, reducing local actors to puppets of exogenous forces.

Comparing Syria, Bahrain, Egypt and Tunisia reveals a rich spectrum of international influence. In Syria and Bahrain, external involvement turned national uprisings into more destructive forces. In Egypt, western support for authoritarian politics has weakened democratic impulses. Only Tunisia seems to have taken a promising path, spared to some extent from the wider geopolitical, sectarian and ideological battles that have swept the region.

In each of these four countries, the Arab Spring has imprinted a new legacy of popular mobilization, in which citizens now recognize the power of their own voice and newly opened political spaces of contestation can be shut down only at great cost. While the future may be uncertain, the old pre-Arab Spring order of authoritarian quietism has certainly vanished.

Syria's devastation

The Syrian civil war began as a social uprising driven by citizens demanding dignity through civil disobedience. The brutal response by the regime not only failed to crush early demonstrations, but helped dissent spread to more communities in a devastating cycle of protest, coercion and counter-protest. If President Bashar al-Assad's military machine soon erased the hope of a peaceful

revolution, it was geopolitical calculations and sectarianism that transformed the insurgency into a full-scale civil war that has killed over 120,000, created two and half million refugees and displaced four million people.

While Syria has always been a mosaic of religious traditions and ethnic communities, external actors have aggravated internal tensions through the invocation of identity politics. Syria has become the central element in a new geopolitical map of the Middle East drawn by the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Turkey and Iran. This map cleaves the Middle East between the two blocs of Islam, Sunni and Shia, and the ancient sectarian terms are now used to cloak the ambitions of those states, eager to increase their influence.

The Alawite clan which forms the regime of Bashar al-Assad has been cast as part of a Shia arc, extending from Iran to Lebanon (and Hezbollah), while the Syrian rebel groups fall into the Sunni camp. Yet they do not fall into that camp with equal credentials. Much like Afghanistan in the 1980s, the opposition lacks unity and cohesion. The overseas governing councils claiming to speak on behalf of Syria are poorly connected to the many armed groups fighting in Syria. Each rebel organization, in turn, has different external sponsors. Rebel forces in the north generally benefit from Turkish and Qatari assistance, while those on the southern front get arms and funding from Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the US.

These geopolitical commitments have generated several paradoxes. By supporting the Egyptian military coup against the (Sunni and Islamist) Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies have undermined their own sectarian narrative. The recent détente in US-Iranian relations also weakens this bifurcating vision. Israel and Saudi Arabia feel abandoned by Washington, and find themselves sudden de facto allies.

Fragmentation and discord

The secularist-Islamist cleavage also manifests itself here. Though the Free Syrian Army maintains a secular status, most other groups are Islamist, ranging from moderates to Salafists and jihadists. In turn, Islamist factions like Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are difficult to evaluate, because outsiders cannot know for certain whether they are truly ideologically motivated or simply using religion for political ends. This diversity of opposition has resulted in fragmentation and discord, which has helped the Syrian regime survive.

Conventional thinking construes the conflict in zero-sum terms: when the regime weakens, the opposition becomes stronger, and vice versa. But just as important as financial assets and military power are human resources. In reality, the Syrian state is running out of an irreplaceable asset –manpower. It needs continued participation by Iran's Quds Brigade, Hezballah units from Lebanon and local Shabiha militias to maintain its military strength. The option to use chemical weapons has vanished, leaving the regime more reliant than ever on its foreign backers.

The ongoing re-radicalization of the Syrian opposition and the regime is a source of extreme anxiety. During the early stages of the insurgency, the Gulf states assisted the first wave of Islamic activists who escaped from prison through private networks of support, but international forces are now more heavily involved. The Al-Nusra Front and ISIS are platforms for Al-Qaida. Saudi Arabia is also increasing its role in directing and reorganizing opposition by supporting groups with Saudi (but not Al-Qaida) ties. On the other side, the Syrian military has undergone a dramatic transformation. Starting with the Battle of Qusayr in May 2013, the Quds Brigade and Hezbollah began reorganising the army into small mobile units organized like militias.

For all these reasons, external powers are not very concerned about stopping the conflict. The US cannot afford another war, and accepts its waning hegemony in the Middle East as it pivots its grand strategy towards Asia. Conservative American thinking dictates that Washington should be content with Syria remaining at stalemate: as Edward Luttwak wrote in The New York Times on 24 August 2013, the West should let each side bleed the other as much as possible, because the victory of either an Islamist-led opposition or the Assad dictatorship would be unacceptable. Saudi Arabia would like to see the Syrian regime collapse, but it would also accept a fractured state that disrupts the Shia crescent linking Lebanon to Iran. Iran and Russia would also be content with a broken Syria, even if it means leaving the Assad regime with a statelet, much like the Afghan example.

The outlook for peace, let alone democracy, is dim. While those responsible for atrocities on the ground must be held accountable, outside actors must also recognise their role in perpetuating this conflict. The real tragedy is that the civil war has grown so vicious that few remember that the first uprisings, much like elsewhere in the Arab Spring, mobilized for dignity and citizenship. War only came later.

Bahrain, unmet grievances

Bahrain is another example of how international forces can muddy the waters of domestic conflicts, but in an inverted manner from Syria. Like other countries of the Arab Spring, the first demonstrations in Bahrain reflected the desire of ordinary citizens for dignity and for their voice to be heard, and at one point involved nearly a fifth of the country's population. Military intervention by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) ended this democratic uprising (1), but more telling has been the way geopolitical and

sectarian discourses have subsumed the original spirit of protest over the past years.

Whereas Syria was quickly categorized by regional and global powers as a besieged Shia regime facing a Sunni majority, Bahrain is the reverse: a Sunni monarchy ruling over a Shia majority. For that reason, Saudi Arabia and Iran see the country as yet another battleground for regional dominance, but with the stakes higher for Saudi Arabia, given the kingdom's proximity. The GCC intervention, in which the West was complicit, was as much a desire to keep Bahrain within the Saudi sphere of influence as it was a statement that a successful uprising here would signal a victory for the Shia Islamic bloc.

The Bahraini struggle did not begin as a sectarian dispute. Both Sunni and Shia citizens marched for democracy, and it was only through the invocation of identity politics that outside forces began reframing the conflict as an ancient rivalry with regional implications, rather than civil disobedience for the cause of reform. However, the replacement of that local dynamic with these external discourses has exposed an inconvenient truth. Without the GCC's financial and military support, the Al-Khalifa dynasty would lack the legitimacy and resources to maintain stability. Allowing geopolitical and sectarian forces into the country actually reveals this weakness, making the regime more than ever dependent upon international support.

The internationalization of the conflict ruined the opportunity to resolve Bahrain's history of communal tension through democratic dialogue. While such a process has helped tear Syria apart, in Bahrain it has artificially maintained the autocratic status.

Unlike Syria and Bahrain, Egypt is more insulated from external pressures, and its domestic actors are far stronger and more autono-

mous in shaping the trajectory of political development. Still, foreign powers are inextricably tied to the political drama now unfolding. This became clear in July 2013 when a military coup overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood-led government. Such an interruption of the constitutional process would have met with worldwide indignation in any other country. In Egypt, it was condoned by most regional and western powers. The US and its European allies, alongside Saudi Arabia and some of its Gulf neighbours, Jordan and Israel, applauded the coup because they feared that they could not control the democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi.

Shortly after the military takeover, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait furnished a $12bn economic aid package, more than nine times the amount of US military assistance ($1.3bn per year). Saudi Arabia was driven by two factors. One was the longstanding mistrust between the Muslim Brotherhood and the kingdom's Wahhabi Islam; the other was its authoritarian regime's deep fear that the Egyptian example of popular sovereignty in favour of Islamic formations could spread, encouraging Saudis to oppose their own rulers.

The fact that so many established western democracies accepted this situation is devastating, for it legitimizes taking power by force in democratic transitions when the "wrong" side wins an election. (General Abdel Fattah Sissi won Time Magazine's 2013 Person of the Year poll, signaling his high status within western circles.) Yet ironically, this anti-Muslim Brotherhood position undermined the wider western-Arab project to create a cohesive Sunni Islamic bloc: in a rare moment, it made Saudi and Israeli foreign policies converge.

Sissi's coup also stemmed from the growing unpopularity of Morsi and a disastrous economic situation. Even those who voted for Morsi recognized the Brotherhood's incompetence and realized that

Islam is not the solution to earthly problems like unemployment and corruption. The Brotherhood had also begun ruling in hegemonic fashion, excluding other political forces from government. This insular mentality reacted to entrenched resistance from the "deep state", including the police, judiciary and the *fulul* (dignitaries of the old political party), which refused to implement their policies. The deep state revealed itself as the only state that mattered. Yet by wielding a heavier fist to combat such pressures, for instance by replacing regional governors and retiring senior judges, the Brotherhood also alienated potential allies such as centrists, leftists and Salafists.

With the violent and bloody downfall of the Brotherhood came the loss of Islamism's aura of invincibility. The Brotherhood was not a branch of a secret international Islamist front with revolutionary potential: it was a human organization with mundane flaws. It could claim no monopoly upon religion, as it could not control Salafist groups or Al-Azhar scholars (2). Indeed, some Salafists, like the Nour Party, embarked on a new direction, becoming politically pragmatic to the point of demonstrating their allegiance to the military regime. With the Arab Spring, the religious sphere has also diversified and fragmented, with new sources of informal authority emerging outside the educational and political mainstream.

The brief time in power of the Brotherhood (*ikhwan*) was not one of Islamizing but "Ikhwanising", a time not of Islamist imposition but organizational takeover. The surest sign of this came during the July coup, when the Morsi government attempted to preserve its authority in the name of legitimacy (*shara'iyya*) rather than Islamic law (sharia), the keystone of Islamist ideology. In this perspective, early western fears that the Arab Spring would equate to the Islamizing of the Middle East seem to have had little justification.

The military coup was supported by the Tamarrud youth movement, the Coptic Church and secular liberals. These were liberal in name only. They called for social pluralism so that they could express their beliefs –but not political pluralism since that would include Islamist elements. The result is no pluralism at all. The military regime has imposed greater censorship than under President Hosni Mubarak. It has suppressed the Brotherhood with a brutality not seen since the time of Gamal Abdel Nasser, and accompanied its prohibition with a xenophobic nationalism that views the Brotherhood as "terrorists" and a pawn of external enemies (such as Qatar or Syria). An unexpected consequence of the revolution was to change the regime from a presidential autocracy to a military dictatorship, with regression back to martial law and legal violence. Elections may still occur, but only under strict control.

With the Brotherhood's banning and the atomization of all political players, military rule has become the default political option. It will not surrender power for as long as it enjoys the support of regional and western powers, for it sees itself as integral to Egyptian society.

Egypt does not suffer from the ethnic and religious tensions of more fragmented states, so the danger of open conflict has been avoided. However, the military cannot simply restore the old authoritarian order. The cost of repressing protests and demonstrations has increased, and Egyptians have learned about the power of mobilization. The Islamist-secularist divide could polarize further, and some Brotherhood activists might take up arms.

What is really new is that public expectations of political responsiveness have risen. Even during the July 2013 coup, the military had to justify its actions as a democratic initiative summoned by popular mandate. The critical choice that confronts the regime is this: does it want a Mubarak-style system with General Sissi wear-

ing civilian clothes, or will it adopt the Algerian model in which civilians dabble in politics but the military retains veto power?

Tunisia, no monopoly on power

Of all the countries affected by the Arab Spring, Tunisia's transition is the most promising. It has been driven by indigenous actors desiring stability and democracy, with external manipulation by outside forces at a minimum. This is partly due to geographic luck: though always in the shadow of France –unlike Syria, Bahrain and Egypt– Tunisia has seldom served as a battleground for competing geopolitical interests. Neither is its small homogenous population a nexus for sectarian strife. The main political problem since the fall of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali has been the struggle between Islamists and secularists.

The Islamist Ennahda Party won the first free elections, but made the same mistake as the Egyptian Brotherhood: it mistook its popular mandate for absolute power. Rapidly the political situation deteriorated, with the assassination of several prominent opposition figures associated with the secular leftist and centrist trends. The rise of militant Salafist groups outside the Ennahda platform also caused concern, for they denounced political participation through elections and threatened a militancy not seen in Tunisia for generations.

In Tunisia, no camp can claim absolute power, and so Ennahda formed a coalition with two secular parties. The leftist and centrist movements finally entered into the national dialogue proposed by the government and agreed to work with the Islamists, so long as radical elements, including the Salafists, could be reined in. All parties recognised that the potential for violence, including further assassinations and the breakdown of legal order, was too dangerous

to ignore. In addition, it became clear that the Islamist-secularist divide was not as sharp as originally feared. Islamist moderates were sometimes difficult to distinguish from their secular counterparts, while many wings of the secular parties as well as state institutions cherish the role of religiosity in any new political system.

Above all, it is Tunisia's vibrant civil society that has advanced the agenda for democratic transition. These civic actors, who include the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), new organizations and interest groups such as women's movements, have anchored themselves in the new public spaces of protest that opened during the revolution. The UGTT, the Tunisian League for Human Rights, the national business association and the legal bar association have forged a new government roadmap and called for the ratification of the constitution.

Unlike in Egypt, the Tunisian military is small and depoliticized, and has remained out of sight since 2011. The old Ben Ali regime was a party-state based on police control rather than militaristic dictatorship. It emphasized technocratic governance without any ideological foundation. For this reason, the Tunisian revolution was able to sweep away the party leadership, including elites at the head of the authoritarian apparatus, while leaving much of the bureaucracy and even police force intact, as they were not connected to the regime through ideological values. The presence of that rank-and-file is why legal order remains relatively durable and viable in Tunisia; likewise, more than in other Arab states, a robust framework of institutions and laws existed. Even if they were not utilized over the past decade under Ben Ali, these resources can be harnessed to build a new order. Because the old regime was devoid of ideological character and full of nepotistic corruption, there may be some authoritarian backsliding, but not a full authoritarian restoration because there is nothing substantive to restore.

The Tunisian transition is neither complete nor perfect. For instance, debates over the constitution, which has only just been ratified, often get bogged down in symbolic disputes rather than legal issues. There is also a danger that the future parliamentary government could become gridlocked since no single actor can dominate the arena, resulting in stalemate. There are fundamental differences in vision to resolve.

Yet Tunisia's pathway is promising because domestic actors who need not worry about external meddling can address any uncertainties. Regional and global powers have not played central roles in the Tunisian transition. The US has not openly opposed Islamist participation in governance or supported any particular secularist group. The Gulf states are not saturating any political faction with money, as Tunisia is located only on the fringes of the Sunni-Shia map. France has also maintained a passive neutrality, shamed by the support it gave to Ben Ali prior to his toppling. If successful, the Tunisian democratic experiment will have powerful ramifications throughout the region.

What now for the fourth year?

Looking ahead to the fourth year of the Arab Spring, we can expect the internationalization of national struggles to continue along potentially destructive pathways. Geopolitical, sectarian and ideological lines of conflict have been drawn across the Middle East, and only by recognizing this external imposition can we reclaim the moral premise of the Arab Spring.

The oil-rich Gulf kingdoms have become more intimately involved in the domestic affairs of other Arab states. The recirculation of oil rents as Gulf aid money has overtaken western aid as a leading source of external financing for poorer states like Egypt, Morocco

and Jordan. However, this is more hazardous. Whereas western aid was tied to long-term strategic interests, Gulf assistance is far more fickle, ambiguous and personalized –and dependent on the vagaries of oil prices and the mood of leaders. Still, it also means that US hegemony is waning.

We must be wary of political pacts being formed in transitional states. In other democratizing contexts like Latin America, pacts that led to mutual accommodation were deeply institutionalized and bound all actors to a common agreement. But what has occurred instead in the Middle East is the displacement of "pacting" by partitioning: mutual hostility drives groups to split power instead of share it.

The weakness of domestic institutions in the region, aggravated by frequent international involvement, has enabled spoilers to potentially undermine transitional processes. Spoilers, such as Salafist groups in Tunisia and hollow liberals in Egypt, are third-party actors with much to gain and little to lose by defecting from bargained agreements made to create new political orders. They arise when institutions are weak and interests are strong. Weak institutions also characterize dysfunctional or failing states that cannot prevent domestic conflict due to the vicious circle of the security dilemma. In Yemen and Lebanon, private groups do not perceive the state as having the physical or legal capacity to protect them, so they stockpile weaponry to arm themselves.

Finally, and more positively, the nature of citizenship has changed –permanently. Arabs no longer see themselves as subjects, but as citizens who deserve dignity and voice. If another wave of popular uprising occurs, it will be more explosive, sustained and spontaneous. Arab citizens now see the brutal extremes that autocratic governments are willing to go to in order to maintain power. And

conversely, the regimes now understand the determination of mass opposition in toppling them. The Arab Spring is not yet over.

Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui is a board member of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies; scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Stanford University; chairman of the board of the Center on Climate Change and the Challenge to Human Security, University of California; and adviser to Human Rights Watch.

(1) The GCC has six members: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

(2) The major institution of Sunni Islam; its headquarters are in Cairo.

The new Arab cold war

After the Paris killings

February 2015

The Arab Spring has turned into a regional cold war, in which sectarian tensions have been inflamed by civil unrest, proxy wars and regimes' failure to reform. For all this, Tunisia holds out a hope of democratic advance.

All across the Middle East, political regimes are inflaming regional tensions to deflect attention from their own domestic problems. Motivated, as always, by the imperatives of their own security and survival, they have fuelled escalating tensions and conflicts while ignoring the fundamental demands of their own citizens and their desire for dignity. It was those demands which ignited the Arab Spring that began in December 2010.

The Middle East is experiencing what many have dubbed a new regional cold war, with sometimes contradictory fronts. The first conflict is being waged over the Muslim Brotherhood and the transnational scope of its Islamist ideology; the second takes the form of a struggle between Sunni and Shia. It is not the first time such conflicts have incited carnage, but this is certainly the deadliest.

The states engaged in this new regional cold war fall into two categories. Countries such as Jordan, Iran and Egypt have put a stop to political reforms, either promised or underway, which would

have increased popular participation and put their regimes further down the road to democracy. States such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have simply deferred any project for structural reform.

Unlike in the cold war of the 20th century, few if any of these states have a viable ideology or blueprint for the future. Their only aim is to survive, by keeping their existing structures of domestic power intact. There is, of course, another way these regimes could survive. They could draw on their traditional legitimacy, and their human and financial resources, to respond to the popular aspirations of their societies. Four years ago, it was their deafness to those aspirations that sparked the Arab Spring across much of the region. But rather than pay the steep costs of such reform, their reflex is to focus on flashpoints of regional tension and conflict in the region. This has resulted in the violent conflagrations witnessed in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen.

Egypt's problems worsen

The Sissi government in Egypt is not just perpetuating the authoritarian system of Hosni Mubarak; it is making it worse. If Abdel Fattah Sissi's desire to increase his power mirrors his predecessor's, so too do the economic and social problems he faces –problems that toppled his predecessor in January 2011. The only winner of Egypt's stalled transition is the military. The Arab world's largest country remains far from settled, since the siege mentality of the Egyptian state makes it incapable of detecting the social currents rumbling beneath the surface, ready to mobilise again.Widespread joblessness, poverty and inequality, combined with a bulging youth demographic, helped spark the popular protests that overturned Mubarak's rule four years ago. These problems remain. The state-driven development strategy envisioned by Sissi may have populist

overtones, but it cannot succeed as long as the army remains a leading economic force with its own financial and political interests. Large-scale projects like the new Suez Canal seem impressive on paper, but they are no panacea for what Egypt has needed for decades –a thriving private-sector economy that coexists with a more efficient public sector, underpinned by an upgraded educational system and better infrastructure.

The closed political system has not improved matters. The Egyptian state has become Balkanized. Without a unified apparatus, pockets of autonomy are appearing that affect the security and judicial organs. This state of affairs has been to Sissi's advantage as it has allowed legal and police institutions to invade the public sphere, repress the media and eviscerate civil society, discouraging a truly national opposition movement. It has also distanced society from the state, which sees the people not as a constituency to serve and protect, but as a threat requiring constant supervision. This does not bode well for the future.

On coming to power Sissi enjoyed some popularity among secular Egyptians afraid of the Muslim Brotherhood. But that does not mean he has a popular social base that will support him during any new crisis. Mubarak relied on the hegemonic National Democratic Party (NDP) to help keep him in power for nearly three decades –though in the end even the NDP could not prevent the January revolution. Sissi has not created any organizational infrastructure of that sort, relying instead on the bunker mentality of the authoritarian state.

In this situation, the regime prefers to engage in regional battles. Since the July 2013 coup against Mohammed Morsi, Egypt has led neighbouring countries like Saudi Arabia and Jordan in a sustained campaign to crush the Muslim Brotherhood, starting with its own Egyptian organization. This hasn't been so violently suppressed since the days of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956-70): most of its

leaders have now either fled the country or languish in jail, thousands of its activists have been killed by security forces, and tens of thousands are still detained, awaiting mass show trials. While Qatar has attempted to support the Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Emirates (UAE) see it as a threat; they have given billions of dollars in economic aid since the coup to alleviate Egypt's financial crisis, despite growing friction with Qatar. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has reacted much as it did in the 1960s, when it felt surrounded by the twin forces of Nasserism and Baathism. The Saudi regime sees the Brotherhood as a transnational threat that could overtake the Gulf.

Influxes of Gulf aid are not the solution however, not least because they create more regional tension in the Arabian Peninsula. Within Egypt, such immense cash handouts result in higher inflation. They also worsen the regime's rentier dependency, discouraging it from making necessary, and costly, economic reforms.

Rival claims in Yemen

As Egypt slides into authoritarianism, Syria, Iraq and Yemen are suffering from the traumatic effects of violence and war. Vicious contestation in these countries involves other regional actors who would rather fuel regional conflict than deal with their domestic problems

In Yemen, Ansar Allah, which represents the Houthi insurgent movement, overcame all resistance and last September gained control of the capital, Sanaa (1). The Houthis are aligned with the Zaydi faith, an early offshoot of Shia Islam. The military from the old authoritarian order deliberately opened the way to militia offensives, and put up no resistance. Established opposition forces, such as the Islah Party, were quickly outmanoeuvred by the Houthi leaders. Meanwhile, centrifugal forces have been tearing the state apart in other parts of the country, such as the separatist conflicts

in the Hadramaut and the south. With ongoing street protests, the political situation remains uncertain.

The Houthis barely registered on the western radar until a few years ago. And many Sunnis considered the Zaydi faith so close to Sunni doctrine that they called it the fifth school of Islamic jurisprudence. Yet the Houthis have received steady support and legitimation from Iran, which sees Yemen as an arena of competition with Saudi Arabia, which has traditionally considered Yemen as an extension of its own territory.

This has resulted in a transnational alliance of religious minorities, much as happened in Lebanon and Syria. The Alawites of Syria are now considered part of the Shia landscape, and so warrant Hezbollah's intervention on behalf of the Assad regime. In a similar way, Iranian patronage has given Ansar Allah Shia credentials that place it squarely on the Iranian side of the regional sectarian conflict. Iran has also provided the financial and military resources to make the Zaydi movement a state actor, much like Hezballah closed political system has not improved matters. The Egyptian state has become Balkanized. Without a unified apparatus, pockets of autonomy are appearing that affect the security and judicial organs. This state of affairs has been to Sissi's advantage as it has allowed legal and police institutions to invade the public sphere, repress the media and eviscerate civil society, discouraging a truly national opposition movement. It has also distanced society from the state, which sees the people not as a constituency to serve and protect, but as a threat requiring constant supervision. This does not bode well for the future.

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Syria's scorched earth

Syria was among the first countries to see peaceful protests during the Arab Spring. That moment of democratic possibility is long

gone, replaced by civil war, humanitarian disaster and a wartime economy. The Assad regime now has only a semblance of sovereignty, controlling the territory it still holds outside Damascus through military checkpoints, rather than any proper legal and civil presence. Unable to provide social and economic services at the most basic level of governance, the Syrian state has lost much of its infrastructure. On the other side, foreign opposition groups have been transformed into military occupation forces. These armed forces are extremely diverse (something the western media often overlooks). IS (Islamic State) is not Al-Nusra.

These actors are not unified. In Syria, IS is not so much a united organization aspiring to be a formal state as a jihadist confederation attempting to become an empire. Much like the Ottomans, IS administers its territory by outsourcing the functions of governance to local actors. Its functional capability has proved limited in terms of a centralized state. The gruesome beheadings seen in the news are not the product of any new sharia legal system implemented as a sign of a new political order. Rather, they are a carefully managed public relations campaign to gain new recruits.

Herein lies IS's fundamental flaw. Because of its quasi-imperial framework, it lacks the institutional capacity to function like a state, such as institutional organisation and taxation. Its model is one of bounties, in which combatants compete for spoils. This works well in the countryside, but cannot run cities.

In this chaos, the Assad regime has adopted a simple strategy –to exist. It does not need to conquer territory back to win this war. Having lost all credibility, it cannot now change course by pursuing the political reforms demanded of it earlier. But as long as it does not collapse, it can claim a perverse victory. This explains its scorched earth policy. No longer intent on preserving the old Syria, regime forces now simply destroy cities and towns where

opposition groups dominate, on the premise that if Damascus cannot have it, nor can anyone else.

Foreign intervention

This slaughterhouse is largely the product of external aggravation: the regional interventions in Syria are well known. The US leads a coalition of western and Arab partners to bomb IS, which in turn helps the same autocratic regimes it declares to be illegitimate. Among those partners are Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. For its part, Assad's regime relies on economic and military assistance from Hezbollah and Iran, and the complicity of Russia.

Before the rise of IS and Al-Nusra, these Sunni Arab states associated Syria with a "Shia crescent" extending from Lebanon to Iran, and sought to dislodge Bashar al-Assad, fuelling sectarian prejudice among their own populations. Now they have been forced to change course and deal with the jihadist problem. Only Iran has maintained a consistent position in supporting the Syrian regime. This shows the evolution of its revolutionary imperative: unable to spread their own revolution of 1979, Iranian leaders have penetrated the Middle East scene through geopolitics, taking advantage of regional tensions during this new cold war.

This sectarian discourse must, however, be treated with prudence. IS is not the product of any Sunni-Shia divide, even though its fighters have declared a campaign against Shia Muslims. Many of the youth drawn to fight in Syria are the products not of religious indoctrination, but of disastrous policies in which social inequalities, economic lethargy and political impasse work together to rob ordinary people of their dignity.

Almost every Arab country has contributed volunteers to IS, with Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt leading the way. Ironi-

cally, some of these countries are the ones that most want to wipe out IS. This domestic lesson upends the conventional wisdom on terror and extremism: it has long been held that radical terrorists can be held in check by reducing their manpower, financing and sanctuaries. IS proves this is not so: violent extremism can emerge from almost nothing. Years after the West believed it had beaten Al-Qaida, it now confronts an Al-Qaida Mark 2, more centred on territory.

Iraq: Sunni versus Shia

IS is of course active in Iraq too, but its rise there is obscuring more elementary issues of social dislocation and political inequality. IS is part of a broader pattern of Sunni resistance and uprising against the abuses of the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad installed by the US after 2003. For many Sunni Iraqis the potential violence of IS seems no greater a threat than the brutalities committed by Shia militias aligned with various political figures, such as the former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki. Many Sunnis felt betrayed after the *sahwa* (awakening) and "surge" of supplementary US forces under General David Petraeus, which helped stabilize the country in 2007.

Yet even in Iraq the sectarian element needs to be considered with sensitivity. Iranian connections to Iraq's post-war government amplified and encouraged sectarian discrimination which the US did little to stop, and which has now reached levels seldom seen in modern Iraqi history. Exploited and exaggerated by the regional climate, the sectarian division in Iraq combines a real social rift with geopolitical meddling, resulting in a far worse outcome.

Syria and Iraq reveal another powerful shift in social realities. Before the Arab Spring, citizens were subjects who were expected

to give unconditional allegiance to the state. But with the breakdown of state authority (in both countries and in parts of Egypt and Yemen), ordinary people are now looking for security from local actors, neighborhoods, militias and movements, rather than the state.

Lessons from the Arab Spring

Different actors are driving regional divisions, but the common thread is clear. The Sunni Arab coalition countries are concerned not just about regional opponents, such as Iran, or ideological threats, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. They see another threat –their own societies– and they treat dissenting domestic voices with suspicion. By ignoring the lessons of the Arab Spring –to look at their own societies and deal with mass demands for freedom and dignity in a meaningful way– these regimes are choosing a path that carries very high political risks in the medium and long term. Their reflex has been to project their problems onto the regional level and ignore structural deficiencies at home.

The recent decline in oil prices shows the shifting fortunes of this regional cold war. Until now, Iran has held the upper hand in the sectarian conflict against Saudi Arabia. It had a more coherent regional policy and intervened more directly in its proxy battles, without intermediaries. Saudi strategy was more fragmented, as multiple actors managed foreign policy –security services, senior princes, the foreign ministry– each with their own favored intermediaries abroad.

What is more, unlike Saudi Arabia, Iran presents a model of popular sovereignty that, if not fully democratic, allows for regular elections and controlled pluralism, even though the Supreme Guide holds ultimate power. Finally, Iran has unsettled much of the Gulf

by courting US interests and pushing them to engage in a nuclear deal, heralding a major diplomatic breakthrough. Falling oil prices are now levelling the playing field. Saudi Arabia has gained from this due to its greater financial reserves. Both states now consider the ultimate battle to be Syria.

The new regional cold war has dramatically changed the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. For the first time in the Middle East's modern history, Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad are not the regional hegemons: they are victims of the Arab Spring and sites of contestation involving outside actors. The lesson is clear: even the mightiest power brokers cannot be exceptions to history.

Tunisia, in contrast, provides a constructive example for the region in terms of democratic promise. A transition with innovative compromises between Islamist and secularist forces, regular democratic elections and rule of law shows that authoritarian legacies need not dictate the political future. If Tunisian democracy becomes truly established, it will be a symbol of hope for democrats, and a thorn in the side of authoritarian regimes.

It is clear the US can no longer serve as the region's uncontested hegemonic power. Its gradual disengagement reflects a significant turn in its grand strategy. The US has learned from its failures in Afghanistan and Iraq. Also, Asia now carries more strategic importance than the Middle East. Global domination no longer comes through occupying territory but through controlling financial markets and trade. The US will still seek to control the flow of regional oil but by regulating the tap, not the well.

There is one historical legacy that has, however, proved resilient: the geographic boundaries drawn by Sykes-Picot have shown more enduring relevance than predicted. Rather than fighting to redraw the map, regional actors are struggling for control of

existing borders. There is an unspoken, sacrosanct understanding among governments and peoples that those borders serve as the last anchor of Middle East stability. For better or worse, they are a social reality. After all, every refugee created by recent crises is expected to return home. And no matter who the winners are in the civil conflicts in Libya, Syria, Iraq or Yemen, those states are not expected to change shape. The popular expectation is that if existing geographic boundaries dissolve, the present instability would spiral into chaos.

Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui is a board member of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies; scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Stanford University; chairman of the board of the Center on Climate Change and the Challenge to Human Security, University of California; and adviser to Human Rights Watch.

(1) See Laurent Bonnefoy, Yemen's new player", Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, November 2014.

Is there an Arab third way?

Paris attacks: terror at home and away
December 2015

The Arab world, beset by divisions between ruling elites and local populations and between Sunni and Shia, is drawing an ever-widening circle of outside players into its domestic and regional conflicts. Among them is ISIS.

There are major challenges to overcome in the Arab world as we now try to conjure up a more peaceful, democratic and stable region. Those challenges include the counter-revolutionary tendencies of authoritarian states, the geopolitical and sectarian nexus of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS or Daesh), but also the open-ended nature of the revolutionary process.

Many of the authoritarian states of the Arab world today resemble what Jean-Pierre Filiu has called "Mamluk" states (1). The Mamluks were originally slave soldiers employed by the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258) from non-Arab lands. Because they were not Arabs, regional leaders could trust that they would not be torn by conflicting loyalties to competing families, tribes or communities. Over the centuries, this Mamluk class gradually gained political and military power until in the 12th century it took control of the state, from Egypt to the Gulf. The Mamluks were able to take over all the more easily because they were not connected to the societies they ruled, which made them invulnerable, other

than to outside invasion. This Mamluk heritage –patrimonial and autocratic– underlies the militaristic republics of the Arab world, such as Syria and Egypt.

These authoritarian regimes see themselves as the guardians of the state and ultimate political authority. They believe they are impervious to their own societies due to their institutional status and nationalistic legitimacy. They have internalized a mandate to act as authoritarian trustees who have stood above society since the inception of these states; in some cases, this dates back to the colonial period. In Egypt, the Mamluk concept was reborn in the civil state (*dawlah madaniyyah*) that came about during the administrative reforms of Muhammad Ali Pasha in the early 19th century.

Upon the outbreak of the Arab Spring, their instinct was to defend this prerogative at all costs. The modern Mamluks wished to ensure that the state apparatus did not fall into the hands of social forces they saw as inferior to themselves. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak was toppled by the 2011 revolution, but Abdel Fatah al-Sissi's coup against the elected Muslim Brotherhood government in July 2013 revealed the military's fear that their institutional prerogatives had come under threat. In Syria, the brutal way the Assad regime attacked the first peaceful protests similarly showed its inability to accept any questioning of its authority.

The Sunni-Shia divide

This patronizing and defensive mentality is reflected in the responses by all the autocracies of the Arab world to popular protests and demands for democracy. Geopolitical factors have reinforced this counter-revolutionary strategy, which grew with the amplification of the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide. The threat of Shia expansionism,

embodied in the strength of Iran, has allowed Sunni regimes to demonize their domestic opposition and justify increased repression as necessary for national security. Another example is Bahrain, where the Sunni regime and political establishment portray the mass opposition as Shia puppets of Iran; in reality, there have been demands for reform ever since independence in 1971. The inverse happened in Syria, where the Iran-backed Assad regime claims the opposition is part of a wider US-backed Sunni conspiracy to dominate the Middle East. Fear of seeing the region taken over by Sunnis explains why the pro-Assad coalition is made up of such diverse groups, including Alawites, Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen.

Indeed, with the Arab Spring, we entered a new sectarian paradigm of the Sunni-Shia conflict punctuated by different inflection points: the most recent are the fall in oil prices and the US-Iranian nuclear deal.

Crucially, any sign of political pluralism is conflated with a threat to national security. In Egypt, the restoration of the military regime has brought brutal repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had previously participated in elections and renounced armed struggle. Repression against Islamists, and opposition in general, is the harshest it has been since the 1950s. The authorities' antiterrorist strategy is a self-fulfilling prophecy: state repression only brings greater resistance and counter-violence, which in turn justifies greater army intervention.

The modern Mamluks are hoping that fears of terrorism and jihadism spreading in the region will make the West turn a blind eye to domestic repression and unconditionally support "stable" authoritarianism. Ironically, many of these autocracies are engaged in double-dealing: attacking religious extremism at home but enforcing policies that fuel that very extremism elsewhere.

In Libya, the western-backed forces of General Khalifa Haftar have deliberately overlooked the spread of ISIS in the region of Derna and instead focused on attacking the competing government in Tripoli. In Syria, during the Arab Spring, the Assad regime freed many jailed Islamists and kept other opposition figures in prison. Yemen's government calls the Houthis a terrorist movement backed by Iran but has engaged in negotiations with Al-Qaida. Gulf regimes have declared ISIS the gravest threat to regional security but have done little to prevent their NGOs from financing armed Islamist networks abroad. Such ambivalence shows that many Arab regimes are not serious about removing the threat of terrorism and jihadism: it gives them the perfect excuse to block all democratic reform.

These efforts may be futile in the long term since revolutionary processes are open-ended by nature. Yet many commentators in the West have pronounced the Arab Spring over, with newly democratic Tunisia as the only real success story. The Arab regimes also assume the era of revolutions and uprisings has ended. The return to authoritarian rule that came to be the punishment for demands for democracy in so many countries seem to justify this view. But we also know from history that revolutionary waves are cyclical, and that popular demands for dignity and freedom will inevitably emerge again whether governments are ready for them or not.

The absence of uprisings does not mean that revolutionary processes have stopped. The structural dynamics and economic problems that caused the first wave of popular insurrections are as bad as, if not worse than, in 2010. The unemployment rates of most Arab countries are virtually the same as before, with most economies still sluggish; public sectors are inefficient and private sectors small. Arab societies have large, and rapidly growing, numbers of young people, who are overwhelming services and economic opportunities provided by governments. Educational systems are still based

upon money rather than merit, and churn out graduates without the skills to compete in the globalizing economy.

Alienated youth

The region's regimes continue to deny their citizens a meaningful voice. Collusion between politics and economics continues to fester, with elite cliques dominating political institutions and national resources. The myth of developmentalism has been shattered for many because increased growth, as measured by statistics like GDP, has not generated real job opportunities or any sense of dignity for the younger generation. Meanwhile the other socioeconomic problems –worsening inequality, failing infrastructure, poor education and endemic corruption– remain.

Yet while these problems have not changed, unless for the worse, the social and cultural fabric of Arab societies has irrevocably shifted. Ordinary people no longer live in fear or awe of authoritarian states, and they cannot be cowed into obedience by threat of force or inculcating an ideology.

Of course, many are now convinced, out of fear or exhaustion, that genuine reform is impossible. People are worried about the spread of ISIS and jihadism and the slow collapse of states like Syria and Yemen. They are exhausted by the failed revolutions in Libya and Egypt, or demoralized at being outmaneuvered in the case of Morocco and Jordan. Disappointment at the early uprisings may have also made people apathetic, resulting in de facto support for their regimes because they see no alternative.

However, fear, exhaustion and apathy are only temporary states of mind: regimes cannot delay reform forever. The failure of authoritarian governments to enact credible reforms was what caused the initial Arab uprisings in the first place. The choice is reform

now or revolt later –and there are rumblings to suggest that this dilemma will not disappear.

In Lebanon, mass protests exploded this summer in response to the government's inability to collect garbage. The demonstrations mobilized across sectarian and ethnic divisions, as Lebanese youth shared the same deep frustration at dysfunctional governance. It was the continuation of a civil movement against a confessional system seen as outdated, which has long dictated politics in Lebanon. The demonstrators were demanding a more democratic system that would put all citizens on an equal playing field rather than concentrating power in the hands of aging elites.

In Algeria, a few months earlier, an unprecedented environmental protest movement mobilized in rural areas to block hydraulic fracturing for shale gas. Thousands rallied against this government project –despite possible economic benefits– because of the environmental destruction that fracking might cause. This struggle has particular significance because we can trace the earliest origins of the Arab Spring to Algeria in 1988. The rise of the Islamic Salvation Front, grass-roots mobilization for change and democracy, the military coup and resulting civil war revealed a long struggle between state and society that encapsulated the essential struggle of the Arab Spring. The recent mobilizations, however sporadic, proved that the spirit of that Spring is still alive.

The major lesson of the Arab Spring, however, is that political change requires more than just moments of mobilization. Even after the overthrow of an autocratic regime, opposition forces need proper organization, political craftsmanship and long-term institutional vision. The failure of the Egyptian opposition to develop these strategies after its brief victory in 2011 allowed the army to return to power. For many people, this implosion of a democratic transition is the main reason that the Arab Spring ended. Still, while

most protest movements made these mistakes, with the exception of Tunisia, they have learned their lesson and will likely perform better in new uprisings.

The rise of ISIS

This assumes, however, that another, more formidable problem has been overcome –ISIS. The organization's rise is due both to the weakness of existing states it has set about overthrowing and to the destructive influence of geopolitical rivalries and outside intervention.

It is an irony that ISIS flourishes in Syria and Iraq, which for decades were held up as archetypes of durable, coercive, stable rule, impervious to change by virtue of their domination of society. While the radical beliefs of ISIS represented a new phase in the ideology of jihadism, the human raw materials required for its growth were already in place.

In Syria, the initial expansion of ISIS required not just foreign recruits but substantial local support. Those bases of support existed in part because the Syrian state, showing little concern for the needs of its population, had allowed pockets of deprivation and marginality to develop, which a highly capable sect could easily exploit.

In Iraq, ISIS has been well received in Sunni communities discriminated against by the Shia-dominated regime of Nouri al-Maliki after the destruction of the state apparatus that followed the US invasion (2). Maliki's regime employed Shia militias that repressed and brutalized much of the population. They also seized equipment left behind by the Iraqi army. For these militias, Hezbollah was a model in terms of organization, brand recognition and military capacity. In this way, ISIS can be seen as not only an external

impetus, but also an internal response to repressive and disconnected governance.

ISIS is a coalition of forces, not a monolithic actor. It has a messianic fringe, but also includes various tribal components, disenfranchised local communities, and former military cadres and Baathist officers of Saddam Hussein's regime. It also differs from Al-Qaida in a number of key ways (3). Al-Qaida holds that the only legitimate form of jihad is military attack; it has no notion of holding territory or building state institutions. It sees itself as a nomadic, globalized network of fighters whose goals will only be attained after they are long dead. For recruits, joining requires commitment, credentials, experience and a complex initiation process. By contrast, ISIS believes the struggle must bear fruit in the present, not in the afterlife. It sees violence as not merely a means to an end, but a goal in itself, through which its world vision is accomplished. The creation of an actual territorial entity stems from the same religious imperative: jihad demands the conquest of territory, establishment of governance and exploitation of all the resources of land and people.

Unlike Al-Qaida, which carefully selects its recruits and makes draconian demands on them, the membership model of ISIS is rather an open call for recruits, and any committed supporter can join, without deep secrecy. While Al-Qaida is made up entirely of fighters, ISIS seeks to cultivate a stable population. It therefore needs families, women and children. In addition, foreign recruits are not so much foot soldiers as vectors of the image of an idealized umma that ISIS wants to project to the outside world.

Object of foreign desire

The majority of Sunni states regard ISIS's view of state building as provocation, even heresy, which is one reason why such a broad

Sunni Arab coalition has mobilised against it. At the same time, the ISIS phenomenon can only be understood in the context of foreign interference. Its threat has become an excuse for outside powers like Russia and Turkey to exercise greater ambitions in the Arab world. Russia's military intervention in Syria, and potentially in Iraq, is connected to ISIS but it must also be seen in the context of a desire to reassert its might across the world. For Russia, direct involvement in the Middle East is part of a gradual resurgence of the military power it lost in the collapse of the Soviet Union (4). Supporting the Assad regime in Syria gives Russia more leverage in Ukraine and other disputed territories that might invite western interference.

Current Russian efforts to project its strategic force within Syria aim to freeze the status quo by giving the Assad regime a sanctuary state, identified by its Alawite ethnic base. At some point, the intervention may exhaust itself for lack of returns on its military investment; but for now, Russia's strategy is renewing a traditional way of viewing the region in terms of different ethnic groups and national identities, rather than actual states.

Partly for this reason, the new Russian-Syrian alliance could also encompass Iraq at some point. The Iraqi government has gradually retreated from an Iraqi national agenda that supports the reintegration of Sunnis; and it is dominated by Shia interests. It is not heavily invested in expelling ISIS since that would force it to reintegrate the currently disenfranchised Sunni communities. Instead, the Iraqi regime may prefer a Russian security umbrella, one that might even replace its American guarantor.

Putin is not much afraid of terrorist reprisals at home or in the Caucasus. While a bomb in the subway of a western capital reveals the vulnerability of the government concerned, in Russia it paradoxically strengthens Putin's strategy. Putin rose to power largely

because terrorism and territorial disputes had weakened the Russian state. His vision of resurgent Russian strength at home and abroad requires fuelling fears of terrorism.

It would not be in Russia's interest to eliminate ISIS because it is vital to weakening western interests and containing the western-backed opposition in Syria. In a bizarre way, ISIS has become a convenient crutch for all actors: the Syrian regime needs it to deflect attention from its own atrocities; the Saudis exploit its staunchly anti-Shia ideology; the Iranians see it as a potential way to counter their Sunni rivals; and the Turks use it to attack the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Turkey's use of ISIS is primarily domestic, creating polarization and tension to turn around the AKP's electoral setback in February. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government managed to appear as the last defence against chaos in the run-up to the November election. The anti-ISIS coalition in which Turkey formally participates gives it a screen from behind which to attack the Kurds among its own population, and their allies in Syria, regardless of whether this escalation may create another axis of conflict.

The Paris attacks represent a change of strategy for ISIS. This violence came on the heels of several other attacks, including the bombings in Beirut against Hezbollah, which supports the Assad regime, and the Russian plane crash in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, all claimed by ISIS affiliates. These events show that ISIS is now actively reaching far beyond its claimed borders of Syria and Iraq, directly striking at perceived members of the international coalition aligned against it. At the same time, the attacks clearly indicate that ISIS is hurting from the coalition's constant military onslaught on its Syrian and Iraqi strongholds; they signify that ISIS has lost its momentum, and counterattacks abroad relieve pressure on the

home front. There is a rational logic to this seemingly irrational violence; it is not the apocalyptic vision of Al-Qaeda.

The West may intensify its air-based military campaign against ISIS, but this will not truly eradicate it. Past experience has shown that non-state actors on the ground will be the most effective in wiping its organizational infrastructure and reclaiming territory. This can be confirmed by new Kurdish offensives in Iraqi Sinjar, and of Shammar Bedouin tribal communities taking up arms against ISIS. However, a real breakthrough will require a strategy that links all these struggles together and minimizes conflicting interests and geopolitical crosscurrents. The domino effect of authoritarian states, the possibility of a resurgence of the Arab Spring, and the complex, intertwined interests surrounding jihadism are now major challenges to the Arab world.

Hicham Alaoui is president of the Moulay Hicham Foundation, a member of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the author of Journal d'un prince banni (Diary of a Banished Prince), Grasset, Paris, 2014. This article is taken from a lecture delivered at the inaugural conference of the Middle East and North African studies programme at Northwestern University, 23 October 2015.

(1) Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Mamelouks modernes, mafias sécuritaires et djihadistes" (Modern Mamluks, security mafias and jihadists), Orient XXI, 15 September 2015.

(2) See Peter Harling, "Taking Iraq apart", Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, July 2014.

(3) See Julien Théron, "IS is here to stay", Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, April 2015.

(4) See Alexey Malashenko, "Putin's Syrian bet", Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, November 2015.

Maghreb's peoples want in on power

Uneven exit from authoritarianism

November 2016

The Maghreb, home to the Arab Spring, is freer of ethnic and religious divides than the Middle East and more insulated from that region's conflicts. Now it is trying –at varying speeds– to negotiate demands for more participation in political life.

We all know that North Africa gave birth to the Arab Spring in late 2010, when the Jasmine Revolution toppled the Tunisian dictatorship, inspiring popular uprisings across the Arab world. Yet we often forget that the Arab Spring's precursor also originated in the Maghreb –in Algeria in 1988, when bread riots resulted in the promise of democratic opening that tragically ended in civil war.

To outsiders, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia seem quite different to each other in regime type, economic base and foreign policy inclinations. Yet they have all reached points of potential conflict, or potential democratization.

What makes these countries comparable is that the Maghreb represents a distinctive subset of the Arab-Muslim world in terms of culture, society and geopolitics. By culture, I do not mean an essential set of fixed values and behaviours. Certainly, there are superficial similarities, from mutually intelligible Arabic dialects to common cuisine: it is often said that travelling eastwards, the

Maghreb ends, and the Middle East begins, where people start eating rice instead of couscous. But culture means a shared repertoire of memories and practices that generate a common institutional mentality. For instance, the Maghreb countries all began independence with a centralized state apparatus, the dual legacy of French colonialism and geography. There was, early on, an expectation of national governance, and a belief that civil bureaucracies of varying efficiency would regulate social and economic life.

Traffic across the Mediterranean

So the Maghreb was endowed with coherent states. Yet the region also contains coherent nations because it has softer ethnic and religious cleavages than other Arab countries. There is no Sunni-Shia divide here –unlike Iraq and Bahrain, where it has been a source of serious strife. There is no confessional system resulting in fractured political institutions, as in Lebanon. Certainly, the status of Berber identity in Morocco is continuously under negotiation, and the Algerian civil war shows that violence can erupt anywhere. Yet at the most basic level, these countries are not struggling with existential issues of national unity or identity based upon ethnicity and religion.

Finally, the Maghreb is in a unique geopolitical zone. Where other Arab states look to the United States and United Kingdom, North African countries are most heavily shaped by France; they have enormous diasporas living in western Europe, giving rise to dense transnational flows of ideas, people and goods crisscrossing the Mediterranean.

They have also been relatively insulated from the major conflicts draining the Arab world. They have not been deeply impacted by the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, nor have they been sucked into the

ideological maelstrom of sectarianism –including confrontations between the Arab Gulf states and Iran– which has resulted in proxy wars consuming Syria and Yemen. To be sure, they are not immune to strategic grandstanding: Morocco has supported the Arab-western alliance against Iran and its allies, even participating in the Yemeni conflict, while Algeria sided with Russia and China in opposing western intervention in Libya. However, these commitments require few economic and military resources.

As well as these similarities, the Maghreb countries have another striking commonality. In past decades, autocracies here, like elsewhere in the Arab world, had become stagnant; rulers focused more on surviving than thriving, and repressively contained societal pluralism. Yet inversely, these countries have long possessed mature, young and enthusiastic citizenries eager to secure their voice and dignity within not just associational life, but the political arena itself. The Arab Spring erupted twice here, not just because governments failed to satisfy popular demands but because people had the will and energy to contest the status quo.

Each country faces its own obstacles. By comparing and exploring Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, we can better appreciate why the potential for democratization is so high in the Maghreb, but also why initiating vital economic and political reforms is becoming costlier with every delay.

The central problem –but also hope– in the Maghreb rests in the role played by the popular voice in the political system. There is stark variation ranging from the new democratic politics of Tunisia to the more closed systems of Morocco and Algeria.

Nearly six years after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the authoritarian regimes of Morocco and Algeria have begun to resemble each other. Each began independent, but quite divergently: Morocco has

a monarchy whose Alawite dynasty has claimed power for nearly four centuries; Algeria's regime is a more recent invention –a militaristic dictatorship symbolized by a civilian figure (currently President Abdelaziz Bouteflika). These leaderships also anchor their legitimacy in different foundations. In Morocco, the king's absolutist authority flows from his Islamic position as Commander of the Faithful and the Shadow of God on Earth; in Algeria, by contrast, the army legitimates its supremacy through historical appeals to the Algerian revolution, positioning itself as the logical inheritor of those who won independence from France. Accordingly, it acts as the unquestionable protector of the state, as when it reacted to Islamist mobilisation during the 1990s as a threat that needed to be extinguished.

Now first among equals

Yet today the two systems are converging in certain respects. In Algeria, the opaque and secretive circle of military and civilian decision-makers, known as le *pouvoir*, is fading as new economic actors enter the political sphere. It is starting to look like the Moroccan *makhzen*, the complex network of elites surrounding the royal palace there. This partly stems from Bouteflika's deliberate strategy of widening the Algerian regime's base with every crisis, and incorporating new sources of elite support. The dissolution last year of the powerful civilian intelligence apparatus, the Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS), removed an obstacle to this goal.

At the same time, market-oriented economic shifts have created a new class of urban capitalists, merchants and business people who have forged close ties with the militaristic center. Unlike the past, these loyalists are not judged by their adherence to the memory of revolutionary ideals, but rather their material, contemporary usefulness. The oligarchy is widening, making the president first

among equals. His role, much like that of the Moroccan palace, is to distribute rewards and mediate competing interests.

Inversely, Morocco is becoming more like Algeria in terms of the opacity shrouding its decision-making process. Traditionally, national policies emanated from a narrow but predictable core: the monarch and the interior ministry, which made no effort to hide this fact. However, like Algeria, the network of elites surrounding the *makhzen* has expanded in recent decades as market-oriented economic shifts have brought new business elites linked to the palace. New political lobbies have also emerged, offering the royal center a broader foundation of support. So, the king now also finds himself first among equals, unable to impose unilateral mandates as in the past, but still responsible for mediating between powerful contending interests. The response to this elite pluralization has been extreme opacity, with scarce information about the decision-making process reaching the outside world. The Moroccan public has little idea how policies are made, and which actors are responsible for them.

What sustains this trajectory in the short term is elite interdependence. The constraining of royal absolutism in Morocco and the disbanding of the Algerian DRS have allowed new elites to develop financial and political stakes in the status quo. These elites share another pathology, however: although times of stability bring internal competition within politics, when crises explode, they stick together like a wolf pack to preserve the system. Such elite unity was seen in Morocco during the death of King Hassan in 1999, in the wake of the 2003 terrorist attacks, and in 2011 when the 20 February protest movement mobilized mass demonstrations. In Algeria, that cohesion will become visible when the ailing Bouteflika passes away and a new figurehead becomes president, although, with the lack of inscribed rules of succession, there is greater potential for instability.

This political logic means that the regime elites of both Morocco and Algeria lack a strategic long-term vision for the future. Focused on immediate survival rather than resolving deep structural problems –from deficits of dignity to economic torpor– they cannot imagine any other political order. Thus, when that order comes, perhaps through revolutionary means, they will be the least equipped to deal with it. Morocco will have marginal advantages in dealing with pressures from below, due to the absence of oil rents and the unifying potential of its monarchy.

Tunisia stands in contrast to its two neighbors. The Jasmine Revolution involved the swift decapitation of the old autocracy. Most elites tied to that system, including party functionaries, had little role in the post-revolutionary democratic government. In this new democratic era, we have witnessed a rare example of popular voice shaping not just national policies but the political fabric of the state itself.

For instance, powerful civil society associations, such as the legal syndicate, journalists' union and Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), have exerted consistent upward pressure for all new parties, including secular groups and the Islamist Ennahda, to remain transparent. The popularly elected parliament, unlike the frail versions seen in Morocco and Algeria, commands the capacity to monitor and even check executive power. One third of these elected deputies are women –a higher proportion than in most western countries. And the Truth and Dignity Commission, established in 2014 to investigate past human rights abuses, is notably staffed by independent figures.

Of course, Tunisian democracy is not fully consolidated, and negotiated bargains between the Islamists and secularists could fray. However, Tunisia exemplifies what a Maghreb country could achieve in terms of popular sovereignty being vested within elected

institutions. Transparency and accountability are far greater here, not just than in the other Maghreb countries but most other Arab states.

Islamism in politics and state

In addition to their popular voice, all the Maghreb countries show variation in how Islamist forces have become politically activated. In all three, it is clear that the issue of religion in politics is not disappearing, and that future stability will require compromise and incorporation.

Morocco is a deceptive case. The (Islamist) Justice and Development Party (PJD) won a plurality of the 2011 parliamentary elections. However, it has played into the regime's hands by forestalling democratic reforms. Ideologically, the PJD is a party of order, not a party of change. It has accommodated the monarchy's imperatives while attempting to insinuate itself into state institutions; it has claimed few managerial successes, while failing to establish any new political routine. Thus, contrary to popular opinion, the PJD's time in government has not attenuated Islamism, because the party was never designed to challenge authoritarian rule in the first place.

This reflects the unique structure of religious discourse in the kingdom. The PJD does not contest the monarchy's religious authority –one whose sacred aura drowns out the Islamists' own claims to leadership. The regime maintains tight control over the schools, ministries and mosques that issue Islamic edicts and proclamations. Islamist movements that have dared to question this arrangement are banned, such as the Adl Wal Ihsan (Justice and Spirituality) group and various Salafist organisations. In sum, the question of religion in politics has never been truly interrogated.

To the outside world, though, Moroccan Islam presents an appealing triumvirate of three religious elements –the Malikite school of Islamic law, the Ashari creed of philosophy and Sufi political orders. Though each has a rich intellectual genealogy, these beliefs generally give space to human judgment alongside textual dictates, and favor moderation over radicalization. Morocco has projected this image outwards to Europe, trying to show how its interpretation of Islam can be made compatible with the secularizing needs of France and other democratic republics.

In Algeria, the legacy of the 1990s civil war, which left up to 200,000 dead, has inoculated society from the popular appeal of Islamism. Unlike Morocco, the regime has no institutional infrastructure for dealing with religious contestation, or any historical authority in Islamic matters. Lingering societal fear of violence due to Islamist radicalization is the Algerian regime's greatest asset, not only to help it contain mainstream Islamist groups but also to battle extremist groups like Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.

So, where the official religious hierarchy has subsumed Islamism in Morocco, in Algeria it has never found a place since the 1990s. Due to the association of Islamism with violence, religious groups in Algeria convey their interests not in terms of social values, but rather politics and participation. Algerian Islamists today advocate systemic reforms, such as getting the army to retreat from politics and improving the competitiveness of parliamentary elections, but they are unlikely to advance. They also say little about foreign policy, leaving security issues, like policing the borders with fragile Mali and collapsing Libya, in the hands of le *pouvoir*.

If Morocco exemplifies the counteraction of Islamist challenge and Algeria shows a gap in Islamism, Tunisia embodies the opposite: its recent history shows how a strong Islamist movement

can be not only accepted but, more importantly, incorporated into a democratic system.

The bargains and pacts made between Ennahda and its secularist opponents since the Jasmine Revolution form the backbone of Tunisian politics today. Initially, neither side wished to compromise on their constitutional demands and institutional beliefs, especially the implementation of sharia law. However, shared fears of mutual destruction in the aftermath of the revolution motivated each to surrender their most extreme claims on politics, resulting in enduring compromise on issues such as protections for civil liberties, the state's civic identity and women's rights.

Tunisian Islamists' new identity

Such dialogue has formalized Islamist participation within Tunisian society and politics –an inclusion that comes after long decades of exile and repression. It also shows that in many ways, Islamism in Tunisia is slowly secularizing. As Ennahda separates itself from more radical Islamists, such as Salafist groups, and prioritizes concrete political and economic goals over abstract religious appeals, it has begun crafting a new syncretic identity. It is becoming less like the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP), which it previously held as its role model, and more like the Christian Democratic Union of Germany in fusing religious principles and political objectives in a pragmatic way.

Despite differences in terms of popular voice and Islamism, the Maghreb countries share one irreducible reality: they are vulnerable to sudden economic and political crises. Even in the post-Arab Spring climate of demobilization, there are flashpoints of popular sentiment that can spontaneously ignite explosions of unrest. These test the capacity of each government to diffuse pressure because of their deeply emotive nature.

The youth-driven societies of the Maghreb desire three things –bread, liberty and dignity. Bread is lacking in all three, as shown by high levels of rising inequality, stubborn poverty and especially youth unemployment. In total, about one-third of all Maghreb youths are jobless. This is to be expected in Algeria, given its dependence on oil and gas rents; the situation has worsened in recent years as the recent dip in global energy prices has resulted in fiscal crisis. However, youth unemployment is pronounced everywhere. In Tunisia, renewed protests about the stagnant economic prospects over the past year have exposed the downside of political bargaining. With different factions immersed in crafting a new democratic system, little attention has been paid to restructuring the lagging trade-dependent economy. Security has also heavily penalized the tourism industry, a pillar of the Tunisian economy, while the Moroccan economy is better equipped to develop than Algeria's. It has better labour and investment laws though it suffers from weak human security and education indicators that will have long-term implications.

So, development will take time. Even if these states can sustain rapid growth today, it will be years before the private sector can produce the jobs necessary to allow well-trained youths to participate in the economy. Here, liberty and dignity can serve as a cushion against turmoil, because these are political and social goods that furnish meaning and purpose in other areas of life.

In this respect, though, Morocco and Algeria are lagging behind. While the process of decision-making may have become opaquer and more pluralized, the nature of executive power itself remains the same: it resides in the hands of a very few, whose legitimacy cannot be publicly disputed. And there is little progress on the parliamentary front. General elections are held regularly for legislative institutions that are politically toothless. They cannot check the actions of the executive leadership or security organs, even with constitutional reforms: as the Moroccan case shows, democratic

gains can be marginal. In Algeria, parliament has long projected a pulverizing, hegemonic leadership, whose constant infighting has rendered it irrelevant. At least in Morocco there is a genuine diversity of parties and ideologies represented, as well as normalized legislative routines, such as inquiries and debates that give content to parliament.

But rising youth alienation is troubling, as shown by the high abstention rate in recent elections. Over the past decade, electoral turnout in Morocco and Algeria has been declining, and now hovers in the low 40s in terms of percentage of registered voters. However, there are millions more who do not even bother to register. When all these are taken into account, the actual participation rate among eligible voters is stuck in the 30s.

A demand for dignity

If Morocco has a more vibrant parliamentary life, it also has a weaker, more enervated media sector. Press freedoms are moving in opposite directions in these two countries. In Algeria, expressive and media liberties gained after 1988 have proved resistant to rollback, as they were born, explosively, in the context of a 'big bang' (1). By contrast, the Moroccan regime has suffocated the press with a gradual strategy: more than a decade ago, it began imposing new red lines that criminalized discussion of more economic and political controversies. It then eviscerated the press directly by targeting critical newspapers, weeklies and websites through legal mechanisms, such as levying exorbitant fines for minor infringements such as slander.

In the final stage, the regime 'weaponized' the media by creating a pseudo-press (2). Each security service, as well as the palace, manages news outlets that masquerade as independent platforms

but in reality, work by neutralizing legitimate media, spreading rumors and engaging in systematic defamation of dissenting voices. These vertically integrated operations are run smoothly. The security services' eavesdropping and surveillance go hand-in-hand with instructions given to editors, writers and publishers. This strategy has a dangerous downside. By depriving society of channels to express disagreement, popular pressures are accumulating without any safety valve.

Morocco and Algeria are facing growing demands for dignity from their populations. Major political scandals, from corruption cases and abuses of power to international controversies, remind citizens of their dislocation under authoritarianism. The issue is not that politics is imperfect. Rather, these challenges spring from non-democratic governance: discretionary power makes all decisions arbitrary, and there are no consensual mechanisms to resolve disagreements over those decisions.

In addition to this, Morocco is uniquely affected by the question of Western Sahara. The territory is considered by Morocco as an integral part of the country, a claim opposed by the Polisario Front, which demands independence. Traditionally, UN Security Council states have accommodated Morocco, and will continue to do so for as long as possible. However, increasingly disruptive social dynamics and increased contestation have appeared in the territory, challenging this accommodation. When such episodes happen, Morocco is forced to compromise. Yet the act of doing so appears as a major setback to the public, because the regime has always linked the issue to nationalist pride.

Problematically, though, the regime entraps itself with this strategy. It ratchets up nationalist discourse to shield itself from internal errors, only to further set itself up for a bigger backlash down the road when the next episode arises. That very nationalist sentiment

finds itself bruised as a result, and that creates more tension within society. Though not directly invoking issues of popular dignity, the way this problem has been treated by the Moroccan system has produced similar effects. Fundamentally, this is less a problem of Morocco's claim to historical rights and national sovereignty than it is that, without democratization, the regime will have no chance of breaking the impasse.

This highlights the broader problem of authoritarianism, which only Tunisia has escaped. Fundamental problems that give rise to frustration among the societies of the Maghreb require dialogue and compromise. Yet non-democratic regimes are least equipped to do this, given their fears of challengers loosening their grip on power. Further, because these governments have no institutional mechanisms to hold them accountable to society, when major crises do strike, the population tends to perceive them to be of their own making.

The future of the Maghreb looks much brighter as a whole than that of the Middle East and the Gulf, given the shared cultural, social and geopolitical advantages of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. But all is not well.

On most measures, the new democratic system in Tunisia will allow its government to deal with future challenges in a more effective way than in Morocco and Algeria; because popular voice figures so prominently in its electoral system, Islamists and secularists have reached bargained compromises. There are few flashpoints of potential conflict besides economic underachievement, and the country's chances for peace and durability rate much higher than those of its neighbors.

By contrast, Morocco and Algeria appear like perennial firemen. Their regimes vigilantly guard against potential crises and unrest,

but can never truly feel at ease. They blame problems on scapegoats, without addressing the structural deficiencies at the heart of their systems that create or amplify those problems. There is only one way out of this dilemma, and that is to move towards democracy.

Hicham Alaoui is president of the Moulay Hicham Foundation, a member of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the author of Journal d'un prince banni (Diary of a Banished Prince), Grasset, Paris, 2014.

(1) The metaphor is usefully employed in Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, Muslim Politics, second ed, Princeton University Press, 2004.

(2) This strategy is similar to the weaponization of information elsewhere, such as Russia, as reported in Neil MacFarquhar, 'A Powerful Russian Weapon: The Spread of False Stories,' New York Times, 28 August 2016.

The potential for Arab unity

Between Muslim Brotherhood and sultans
November 2017

Despite regional and sectarian rifts, strong cultural bonds draw the Arabs together. Diminishing oil revenues (and any return of the Arab Spring) may incline the region's states to turn to, not away from each other.

Can there be Arab unity at a time of unprecedented regional fragmentation and conflict? The idea of a single coherent nation, which began in a modern form at the start of the 20th century, may be illusory, but there have been many efforts to build cooperation among the Arab states to that end. While the dream of creating one pan-Arab state is gone, inducing closer regional integration in economic and political terms could greatly benefit all peoples of the region, Arabs or not.

Most of these states suffer from a major structural weakness that could be improved through greater integration with their neighbours. The region has countries with dramatically varying populations, from Egypt's nearly 100 million to Bahrain's one million. Saudi Arabia and Algeria have plentiful natural resources, especially oil and gas, while Tunisia and Jordan do not. Some still struggle to achieve universal literacy and education, while others have a surfeit of educated citizens in search of jobs (1). Some have built up their agriculture and become food exporters; others depend entirely on imports to survive.

However, all these states constitute spaces that can exchange and interact with each other. Regional integration would bring concrete collective payoffs to be shared by all Arabs. These would materialize first in economic form, through the creation of a common market, with unconstrained movement of labour and trade in goods and services. Such economic unity would also enhance the region's bargaining power with the rest of the world over trade and investment. Integration would also be a factor for peace, encouraging Arab governments towards greater diplomatic cooperation and less violence. It could help coordination to resolve common challenges, such as water shortages and other environmental problems, and caring for refugees.

But the obstacles remain difficult. States have problems coordinating in economic and social terms. The Middle East and North Africa lag badly behind other global regions such as Latin America or East Asia, North America and most of Europe. The Arab states have the world's highest tariffs and other trade barriers, resulting in the lowest volume of intra-regional trade. And they suffer from poor infrastructure, particularly roads and utilities. Capital flows as measured by cross-border investments are extremely low, and are dominated by the wealthy, oil-exporting Gulf states. National educational systems are disconnected from each other. The distorting effects of oil rents continue to shape regional affairs by injecting the toxic effects of excess money into divisive purposes, from financing repression and military build-ups to amplifying civil conflicts and further insulating the wealthiest regimes from popular interests.

Political obstacles

The obstacles are also political. Most states continue to have monarchical or authoritarian regimes so oriented towards their own survival that they are unwilling to pay the short-term costs of integration, even if it generates long-term benefits. The region's repeated exposure to

external interventions has also caused traumatic geopolitical cleavages. This is especially evident in the ongoing civil war, pitting a contradictory coalition of Sunni actors against the perceived threat of a Shia axis. The Sunni actors are 'sultans' (Egypt and Saudi Arabia); mainstream Islamists (Muslim Brotherhood); and Salafi jihadists, in particular ISIS (Islamic State). Iran, Hezbollah, Syria, Iraq (excluding Iraqi Kurdistan) and Yemen's Houthis make up the Shia axis. These clumsy categories obscure real schisms: within the Sunni camp, though the sultans and Muslim Brotherhood both oppose Salafi jihadism, they envision very different political orders. The sultans' authoritarianism is based on traditional legitimacy, grounded in the historical role of armies and monarchies as protectors of society and guardians of the state. A major development has been a split among the sultans, as seen in the recent Saudi-Qatari rift. In contrast, the Brotherhood's vision is predicated on sovereignty of the masses, defined by popular adherence to Islam.

Arab states cannot mimic the European model of economic integration. Modern Europe was built on strong states, wanting to consolidate their power by unifying disparate territories and populations. Such experiments were led by political elites and anchored in the convergent preferences of national bourgeoisies able to project their entrepreneurial interests well beyond national borders (archetypical examples are the Prussian model of unification and the Piedmont project culminating in Italy's Risorgimento). European reindustrialization after the second world war joined material and democratic advancement. Economic development had a spillover effect into politics: the commercial enterprises, business associations and trade unions that led the way also helped sustain political pluralism.

Nothing like this has taken place in the Arab world. Still, the time is right for renewing the process of integration, for reasons far beyond a sentimental image of a united Arab people. Six years after the Arab Spring, the region is fractured by civil war, with

the Saudi-Qatari crisis just the latest front (2). Entire states, such as Libya, Yemen and Syria, are in danger of collapsing, with Iraq having nearly imploded several times. The rise of ISIS and other Salafi jihadist groups shows the allure of extremist violence and ideology to the region's disenchanted youth.

At the same time, the Arab world has something many other regions do not: a strong sense of Arab identity that brings transnational cultural features, including a common language and political norms, in spite of the region's regimes. In the mid-20th century, the spread of pan-Arabist ideology demonstrated how political beliefs could rapidly cross borders, even with outdated communications technology. Decades later, Islamism spread in the same way, replacing the lost dream of a single Arab nation with the promise of a community based on belief. The Muslim Brotherhood and, in many ways, ISIS are products of this process. Arab integration can build on this foundation by blurring the economic and political boundaries of the region.

Lessons learned

At the core of the idea is an unshakeable premise: cultural affinity and shared linguistic, geographic and historical origins have given all Arabs a feeling of belonging to a single unit of civilization. This idea goes back to the twilight of the Ottoman empire, when thinkers put forward the concept of a common Arab nation predicated upon the identity of a proud people who rejected foreign domination.

The heyday of pan-Arabism came after the second world war with the creation of the Arab League and Nasser's regime in Egypt. The Arab League represented the first effort to tie the newly sovereign states into a multilateral forum for greater cooperation. Though pan-Arabism declined fast after the cataclysmic defeat of the Arab

coalition by the Israeli army in the Six Day war of June 1967, the memory of it still resonates today.

From the 1950s to the early 1970s, there had been attempts to realize this ideal. The most prominent was the Egyptian-Syrian merger leading to the United Arab Republic of 1958-61, later revived with the 1963 proposal to join Egypt, Syria and Iraq in a confederation. Other initiatives included the short-lived Hashemite union of Jordan and Iraq in 1958, and the association of Egypt, Sudan and Libya in the Federation of Arab Republics in 1972, though that remained an empty shell.

The 1970s and 1980s ended this vision of Arab unity. The 1970s were marked by Jordan's Black September civil war, the Moroccan-Algerian conflict over 'Western Sahara', the Iranian revolution, the Iraq-Iran war that followed, and Egypt making peace with Israel, thus rupturing the Arab consensus. During the 1980s, there were new efforts to tie states together through political organizations smaller than the Arab League, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab Maghreb Union and the Arab Cooperation Council. Of these, only the GCC continues to have any actual function.

The 1990 Gulf war marked the definitive end of pan-Arabism as a political ideology. The invasion of one Arab state by another was unprecedented, and revived the old conflict between the region's wealthy haves and its poorer have-nots, a divide that continues today with the widening gap between the oil-rich Gulf states and ordinary Arab citizens. At the same time, Iraq's failed occupation of Kuwait precipitated a new series of western interventions.

The fundamental problem of pan-Arabism lay elsewhere. From its inception, it was deeply influenced by German romantic-nationalist thought, which put a premium on cultural purity and instilled an

exclusionary belief of superiority. A devastating implication was that pan-Arabism was both unable and unwilling to incorporate minority communities, such as Kurds, Jews, Christians and Berbers, as equals within Arab countries. Pan-Arabism was necessarily hostile to expressions of patriotic loyalty to a single existing state. And it too easily accommodated authoritarianism: it gave free reign to sultans promising regional integration but remained silent on pluralism and accountability.

Shared interests

Still, the rise and fall of pan-Arabism holds an enduring lesson: new efforts at regional integration cannot be driven by values or romantic ideals alone. To succeed where pan-Arabism failed, these efforts must take into account the permanence of existing state boundaries and the particular demands of each Arab state, both material and symbolic. They must find ways to tie these often-divergent demands into a common framework of shared interests that would benefit all Arabs, though requiring short-term sacrifices and costs. It is important to remember that while pan-Arabism is gone, the natural impulse towards affinity is stronger than ever. This was clear during the Arab Spring, when protests spread like wildfire throughout the region despite the sultans' best efforts to block them. This sense of Arabness is also the backbone of a regional public sphere, where ideas and images circulate freely across societies, through both broadcast and social media.

Can a shared interest in economic development foster Arab integration? Until recently, it was hard to imagine greater economic unity, given the insidious effects of oil and gas rents. Political scientists know these are as much a curse as blessing since they give autocracies the means to finance repression and purchase mass acquiescence through universal welfare in the form of subsidies.

Rents have always circulated in the region, through foreign aid, worker remittances and other financial flows.

Hydrocarbon rents exacerbate conflicts by giving those regimes the financial means to interfere in other Arab states' affairs. A fall in oil and gas prices dampens their interventionist impulses, but also destabilizes them by removing the resources needed to maintain social control. It also affects resource-poor countries that rely on hydrocarbon exporters for foreign aid and worker remittances.

Over the past two decades, the richest exporters have invested a large part of their revenues in sovereign wealth funds collectively worth trillions of dollars. The role of government has shifted from spurring internal development to overseeing the management of overseas financial portfolios. This raises the issue of who fundamentally and legitimately owns the oil and gas bounty –the monarch, the ruling family, state-owned firms, foreign banks where the assets are placed, or the nation as a whole?

Decline in oil rents

But the Arab region now faces a perhaps permanent decline in rents. The volume of (technically recoverable) oil deposits by far exceeds maximal projections of global demand. While the rapid growth of the middle class in developing markets like India and China means a need for more energy, the development of renewables and technological improvements (especially in automobile engines), triggered by global warming, is slowing actual demand. And the arrival of shale oil on the global markets is further depressing the price of oil.

Moreover, the pricing mechanism for oil has changed considerably in recent decades. The financial value of hydrocarbons is no longer merely in their upstream extraction, in which Arab exporters specialize, but also in downstream transformation into secondary

products such as petrochemicals and plastics. This evolution has contributed to the globalization of the energy market: hydrocarbons can be traded openly, regardless of origin, to buyers across the world. All this has tilted influence away from states, which in the Arab world monopolies and own extraction, and towards global private market actors that engage in trading and downstream transformation. OPEC, which used to control the price of crude oil, is now less a price maker than price taker.

The decline of hydrocarbon wealth means long-term economic difficulties. The need to diversify, away from rents and towards sustainable economic development, could serve as a powerful motivation for closer intra-regional cooperation. Shared strategies could help identify new growth sectors while also harnessing the advantages of different Arab states. Some non-hydrocarbon exporting countries already have promising industries, ready for future expansion and global competition. These include tourism and agriculture in Tunisia, phosphates, tourism and manufacturing in Morocco, steel and automobiles in Turkey, and textiles and pharmaceuticals in Jordan. Even Saudi Arabia recognizes the coming crisis, and has proposed a Vision 2030 plan calling for a complete move away from oil dependence.

But channeling what rents remain into new areas of economic development will mean setting aside the instinct to minimize short-term risk. Oil exporters have little incentive to invest in renewable energy such as solar technology because, unlike hydrocarbon deposits, they cannot monopolies the source or store the fuel for financial gain. Economic diversification also makes little sense without liberalizing immigration and labor policies, to create larger domestic markets. In the Gulf states, the paradigm of worker sponsorship (kafala), which keeps migrant workers in virtual slavery, would need to be overhauled in favor of employment with wage and labor protections. This would incentivise greater local hiring, and help put back

into domestic economies some of the huge capital that leaves each year in remittances. It would also mean opening up national labor markets to workers from across the region.

Diversification also requires an unprecedented degree of diplomatic engagement and open collaboration, which entails political costs that many Arab governments are unwilling to pay short term. Look at the stalled interconnection grid linking the Gulf states' electricity networks, which would vastly reduce power and distribution costs. This supergrid remains unfinished and underutilized due to recurrent disagreements between the states, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

No consensus leader

It remains extremely hard for most Arab states to sacrifice short-term interests for the long-term payoffs of regional integration, no matter how desirable. What makes the integration project harder in the current geopolitical climate is the absence of an Arab leader capable of achieving a consensus. Egypt, which played this role historically, is no longer the political vanguard and cultural center of the region. Saudi Arabia has great wealth, but finds it hard to translate its vast resources into pan-Arab appeals.

The Arab world cannot turn to external actors for a solution. The European Union is an obvious economic and political partner to some Mediterranean Arab states, but since the end of colonialism, the West has more often hampered the vision of Arab unity than helped it. Major powers like the US, France, and the UK still prefer dealing with Arab states on an individual basis rather than thinking of them as a coherent whole.

And if the Arab states can't rely on the West, they can't hope for much more from the East. Neither Russia nor China have any stra-

tegic interest in helping to unify a region they wish to dominate and exploit. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, a modern reformulation of the historic Silk Road linking the Middle East to the Far East, is not a viable solution, for it would merely trade one form of hegemony for another.

The answer lies in the domestic politics of Arab states. Today, most Arab regimes can't enter into such a region-wide pact without first reformulating the political pacts that govern relations with their societies at home. A more democratic reconfiguration that incorporates electoral accountability and institutional transparency would greatly expedite the regional integration project, for several reasons.

First, as the experiences of other regions show, genuinely pluralistic regimes are the most reliable stakeholders for regionalism. Second, decision-making in genuinely pluralistic regimes is inherently more inclusive. As a result, economically sensitive obstacles to regionalism that require reform are more likely to be resolved, such as how to compensate sectors that may be negatively impacted by free trade. Third, political power in states that have accountability and transparency is not monopolised by a narrow ruling elite, but is distributed across different electoral institutions and balancing organs. Such regimes are more likely to accede to regional integration schemes that require the surrender of exclusive policymaking prerogatives over certain areas.

In the absence of such pluralistic politics, the only factor that would convince the Arab states of the benefits of regional integration is their own survival instinct. If the tumult in the Arab world reached a point at which political and economic unity was the only way to stay in power, then most leaders would gladly bear the short-term costs of integration. But such moments of extreme instability are rare in modern history. It took two world wars to convince many Europeans of the need to unite. By contrast, the

network of security pacts in the Middle East, backed by western powers, ensures that any potential cataclysm, from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 to the Syrian civil war, is prevented from engulfing the entire region.

The impetus for future regional integration in the Arab world will be domestic political change that transforms and pluralizes states. And that will come with future waves of the Arab Spring.

Hicham Alaoui is an associate researcher at the Weatherhead Centre, Harvard University, and the author of Journal d'un prince banni: Demain, le Maroc, Grasset, Paris, 2014.

(1) UN Development Programme, 'Arab Human Development Report 2016', 2016.

(2) See Fatiha Dazi Héni, 'Picking a quarrel with Qatar', Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, July 2017.

Failed dream of political Islam

Middle East needs new dialogue between faith and politics

November 2018

Islamism has imitated, or colluded with, the state autocracies it claims to oppose. It has failed to suggest its own answers to economic problems, social justice, education or corruption.

Muslims centred their identity upon the duality of religion and politics embodied in the umma, or community of believers, until the twilight of the last meaningful Islamic caliphate, the Ottoman empire (1290-1924) (1). The umma encompassed the totality of Islam and its human achievements. It was timeless, representing Muslims' past and future, and spatially unbounded, stretching across the known world. It was neither a government nor a theocracy, but a collectivity of faith.

This worldview changed dramatically with the fall of the Ottomans and rise of western hegemony. Through imperialism and war, western modes of thought penetrated Islamic lands, especially the Middle Eastern heartlands. The declining Ottoman empire had imported European military models, and colonized territories began to be incorporated into western economic production. Western legal traditions that emphasized rules and systemic constructs replaced the discourse of sharia (which had allowed a lot of room for adaptation) as the constitutional backbone of new nation states. In

this new era, the religious and political fluidity around the umma gave way to codified institutions and territorial boundaries.

Reacting to this Islamic decline (*inhitat*) and to western pressures, Muslim thinkers reinterpreted their faith in the late 19th century to create new ideologies promising rejuvenation. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abdouh led attempts to make Islam more legible by calling for the adaptation of Muslim life to the West's views on economic and political modernity. They never called themselves Salafists (a term used and abused by western scholars); for them, it was about returning to the original sources to find compatibility with these new challenges.

In attempting to 'rescue' Islam, these Muslim thinkers, who supported the political, cultural and religious movement of the *nahda* (renaissance), unwittingly decentered it. The manifest truths of Islam, and the umma, were no longer the reference points for the Islamic experience. Instead, Islam was to be judged solely by how well it could emulate western achievements. This squeezing of Islam into western containers was accompanied by the creation of new state entities across the post-Ottoman Middle East; the republican and monarchical regimes that emerged were not expressions of ancient Islamic leadership, but modern replicas of 19th-century militarized western despotism.

The decentering of Islam left another powerful legacy: by the early 20th century, Islam had become the focus of resistance against the West for any who rejected the earlier Muslim project of reform and reconciliation. The politicization of Islam turned faith into an instrument of anti-imperialist struggle, and caused new activists to envision Islam as a counter-model to the West; it could liberate Muslims from their alleged backwardness and protect them from the influence of western culture, but only if they could fully understand the Islamic scriptures.

The birth of political Islam

This created Islamism, an ideology that fused religion and politics far more strongly than the classical Islamic canon it invoked as inspiration. Unlike the fluid religion-politics duality of Islam's formative centuries, Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, imposed a rigid ideal; the faithful no longer asked what kind of Muslims they should be; instead, rejecting the interrogative and philosophical traditions of early Islam, they were meant only to ask if someone was a Muslim or an unbeliever. Jihad (from personal spiritual striving to the fight against enemies of Islam) and takfir (excommunication) –concepts buried in Islamic jurisprudence– were reinvented to justify resistance and struggle in this new world that bifurcated Islam and the West (2). Islamists no longer saw Islam as a timeless and boundless entity representing the entirety of God's sovereignty and its human creation; their goal became unambiguously to capture state power.

Islamism's swift advance during the second half of the 20th century was made possible by the end of Arab nationalism as the prevailing ideology. The Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war shattered these nationalist ideals, and the 1979 Iranian revolution finally destroyed them. The fall of the shah demonstrated that political activists committed through religious belief could overcome a powerful authoritarian regime supported by the biggest western patron.

That Islamism has failed to deliver its utopian promise is self-evident. Excepting rare cases like Tunisia, Islamist movements across the Arab world have been neutralized or bankrupted. The Algerian civil war in the 1990s foretold the disappointments to follow later on with the Arab Spring. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had a disastrous year of government before being toppled by a military coup in July 2013 (3), followed by the repression

of its members. In Iraq, Syria and Yemen, Islamist forces failed to promote democracy, and were consumed with battles against violent extremism. In Morocco, Jordan and Kuwait, legal Islamist parties enjoyed electoral success in tamed parliaments, but this exposed how trivial their position was, operating in the shadow of powerful monarchies that still held absolute executive power.

The failure of the Islamist model has three basic causes. First, Islamist movements did not offer meaningful social and economic solutions that went beyond slogans. To say 'Islam is the solution, and the Quran is our constitution' is not the same as innovating public policies to solve the problems that eluded authoritarian leaders of the past: rising poverty, mass unemployment, failing education and endemic corruption. It is telling that once in government, the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) in Morocco, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, pursued economic policies concocted by state technocrats under pressure from international financial institutions. This exposed the absence of any theory of economic production in the Islamist doctrine, and its lack of any vision of the state's role in restructuring the economy.

The second cause is the failure of the Islamist parties to lead inclusive and democratic politics, except in Tunisia. The argument that Islamists have never been given a fair chance to govern so as to prove their democratic credentials is no longer valid. In Egypt, the Brotherhood was more fixated on domination than pluralism, and its repeated exclusion of secularist actors advocating a civic state gave the military a pretext to overthrow President Mohamed Morsi.

Islamists also failed to show any immunity to the temptations of material politics. Where they constituted legal opposition groups, they made too many convenient alliances with authoritarian powers, tainting themselves with the dirt they claimed to reject. In Egypt, after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, the

Brotherhood expediently collaborated with the army but held all the other political actors in contempt.

In Morocco, the PJD cared more for its good relationship with the monarchy, which gave it new resources and political visibility, than for advocating reform of the regime. After it won the 2011 elections, its religious discourse reflected this subordination by emphasizing reworked Islamic principles like *nasiha* (advice to the ruler) and *taa* (obedience as virtue). The core principles it previously claimed, such as defending human rights and freedom of expression, were now marginal. It is impossible for the PJD to advocate democratic change and constitutional reforms when it refuses to contest the king's supreme right to adjudicate on these matters. Today's alliance with the palace could turn into one with the army, and eventually with the *fulul* (partisans of the old regimes). The PJD, content to keep to its place as an electoral participant, has gone from playing the role of an opposition party to playing a governmental one, while Moroccan politics has remained the same.

Schisms and conflict

Islamists are now entangled in the geopolitical cleavages and sectarian conflicts of the region, tarnishing their claim to stand above dirty post-colonial modernity and to offer a pure vision of prosperous independence.

Lebanon is an example. Hezbollah began there as an arm of the Iranian revolution and expressed its Shia ideological imperative to spearhead radical politics. Soon after its founding, it morphed into a nationalist movement fighting to liberate Lebanese territory from Israeli occupation, and could be classified as an Islamist movement with a popular base. Today, under Iranian patronage, Hezbollah still claims to struggle on behalf of the Lebanese nation, but in

practice devotes resources to the war in Syria against Sunni forces wherever they come from (4). The 'party of God' has proclaimed that it fights in Syria on the battlefield of Armageddon. So Hezbollah is less an Islamist movement concerned with Lebanon's economic and political future than a transnational entity, intent on accompanying the Mahdi (the occulted imam) on foreign soil.

In Iraq, geopolitical factors have made Islamism impotent. Since the invasion in 2003 by a US-led coalition, the voices with the most political and social impact have been Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and Al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Committees). In 2006 Al-Sadr switched from denouncing the US-sponsored political transition to participating in the process. His movement then gained enough parliamentary presence to become kingmakers, and Sadrist social networks displaced the nascent state in southern Iraq. Later, the Committees emerged as grassroots militias that outfought ISIS, unlike the regular Iraqi army. The Sadrists and Committees collectively proved more effective in shaping Iraq than the traditional parties that emerged to fill the post-Saddam void, especially the Islamic Dawa Party, modelled on the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology and strategy.

Islamists often claim to be victims, oppressed by the West or excluded by authoritarians, while simultaneously asking the faithful to spread the Islamist creed aggressively in order to conquer the political realm and resolve these ills. These movements are products of the authoritarian states they claim to target, for the theological attention they give to democratic governance or economic development is tiny compared with their exhortations to chastise unbelievers or to create the perfect Islamic state.

Tunisia is the lone Arab success story of Islamist governance. The Ennahda movement and its secularist counterparts, such as Nidaa Tounes, have worked together to avert social conflict and preserve

democracy. Ennahda is a meaningful Islamist force with a large popular base and strong leadership, while Nidaa Tounes and other secularist parties are a mixture of leftists, nationalists, business elites and leftovers from the regime of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, removed from power by Tunisia's 2011 revolution.

The Tunisian exception

Tunisia is the exception that proves the rule. Ennahda succeeded under the rarest of circumstances, and only by putting to one side its Islamist orientation. After January 2011, Tunisia's democratization and Ennahda's inclusion enjoyed robust international support and little external interference. Ennahda had been banned for decades, and so it evolved by absorbing new ideas from outside the Islamist canon. Its electoral victories in parliament did not result in ideological domination but compelled its leadership to compromise by softening religious demands within the constitution and public policies. By learning how to separate its Islamist message from political life, and working closely with non-Islamists, Ennahda secularized; the process became inexorable since each attempt to overstep met a popular secular backlash. Also, the disastrous precedent of the coup in Egypt created a sense of caution and compromise.

In Tunisia, Islamists have accepted that no interpretation of Islam can trump elected officials in crafting domestic and foreign policies. And elected officials cannot impede the peaceful practice of faith, even in the public sphere. Islamism can engage in this double tolerance (as do other religions), but must renounce its most intolerant demands to give all voices equal opportunity to have their say.

Though rejected by many Islamists, such give-and-take dynamics can be found even in the earliest days of Islamic civilization, when it was recognized that though sacred texts contain holy words, their

interpretation and application are human acts that must be regularly questioned, debated and transformed in an inclusive manner. This dialogue between the sacred and the profane, or the divine and the human, embodies the religious/political duality of Islam, not the insistence that one should destroy the other.

What is the solution?

If Islamism is not the solution, then what is? The Arab Spring gave the beginning of an answer: democratic politics, popular sovereignty and the reclamation of dignity. Much of the region has fallen back under renewed authoritarianism and it has become clear that Islamists cannot be saviors. Their utopia, which promised salvation in return for adherence, has failed; and the other, democratic, utopia of the Arab Spring did not materialize.

Arab citizens have retained their desire for faith, although they are now 'anti-clerical' in repudiating authorities that claim to interpret that faith. Arabs are now alienated by any instrumentalization of the sacred, or the idea that figures such as kings, or political groups such as Islamists, or institutions such as state-appointed ulama (juristic experts), inherently command sacred status and deserve obedience or awe. The popular rejection of sacredness means the end of the legacy of the Iranian revolution and the loss of Islamism's luster.

Regimes have shifted their strategies accordingly. They have attempted to fill the vacuum left by intersecting trends from below: the anti-clerical rejection of Islamist propaganda, people's craving for democratic freedoms, expressed in the Arab Spring, and an enduring desire for religiosity in everyday life. The regimes have imposed their own interpretations of morality and faith, with many recent examples in the Middle East and North Africa, such

as stringent enforcement of public fasting during Ramadan or the place of women in society.

In dictating these social rules, autocracies cater to an unspoken conservatism among some citizens, while suppressing young people's desire for freedom. But by subjecting religious spaces to state power, they repeat the Islamists' mistake.

Such state interventions into the religious sphere have profound long-term implications not just for religion but for the future of democracy and stability in the Middle East. Some governments have staked their foreign policies on the external dissemination of official Islam. Until recently, the Party of Justice and Development (AKP), in power in Turkey since 2002, relied heavily on the allied networks of Fetullah Gülen to consolidate state power and export its vision of Islamism. Since President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan split with the Gülenists (now his number one enemy), AKP politics and ideology have become centralized around Erdoğan.

Wahhabi soft power

The monarchies are going in the same direction. In Saudi Arabia, the economic and political moves of Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) have been widely covered by the media, but the religious reconfigurations are less visible. In the past, the partnership between the House of Saud and the Wahhabi ulama (with their conservative Salafist ideology) allowed for institutional equilibrium: the monarchy retained political supremacy and endorsed the religious establishment, which enjoyed theological eminence that allowed it to control Islamic doctrine. In this old arrangement, Wahhabi Islam provided the soft power.

The regime's new Islamic vision radically breaks this equilibrium. Inspired by MBS, the regime wishes to control Wahhabi discourse

and religious rulings. The process echoes the Egyptian state's earlier co-option of Al-Azhar University, in the 20th century, when this historic center of Sunni learning lost its independence under successive military dictatorships. The Saudi leadership is eliminating the autonomy of the religious echelon, making Islamic discourse harmonies with the state apparatus. This is the only success of MBS. His attempts at economic modernization have stalled, while Saudi foreign adventurism in Qatar, Lebanon and Yemen has suffered serious setbacks (5). The murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October is both a terrifying violation of human rights and a foreign policy fiasco.

In contrast with the Saudi monarchy, Morocco's approach to state appropriation of religion is through soft power. The state projects its vision of Islam along a north-south axis as part of its religious diplomacy. The first goal is Europe, where Morocco enlists support with a message of moderate Islam that can combat radicalism and terrorism. (Morocco is training French imams.) The second is to make Morocco a new economic and political centre of gravity for Africa, countering Algerian influence.

Morocco also wants greater political control over its diaspora in Europe. Moroccan religious institutions in Europe, such as the Brussels-based council of ulama, administer religious matters, and are subject to intervention by Moroccan diplomatic consulates and security services, which seek to influence expatriates. An image of 'moderation' is projected abroad, but at home there is state bigotry disguised as the protection of public morality, with official Islamic councils targeting minority groups and thwarting religious debate, fighting blasphemy and atheism, and repressing adultery and homosexuality.

Beyond these immediate aims, this strategy is meant to sustain the traditional foundations of authoritarianism. Moroccan Islam

abides by the constitutional position of the king as Commander of the Faithful, apex of religious authority. Yet this institution, as embodied by the king, also has a political imperative to preserve the status quo, which means making religious actors powerless and neutralising democratic movements that challenge the state from below.

This religious-political arrangement faces fundamental challenges. There is the economic problem: without successful and sustainable economic redistribution, social actors will not give total obedience. The arrangement is a mishmash of religious ideas held together by political power, and as such can be challenged at any time by coherent theological knowledge expressed through Islamic history. This is not a matter of secularization, but of monopolizing religious space. Finally, Muhammad VI's insistence on projecting a non-traditional personal image contradicts the entire strategy.

The very idea of 'moderation' is inherently autocratic because it demands dictating the boundaries of religious discourse. The true goal should be not moderate Islam but enlightened Islam. Enlightenment requires critical thinking, and that is the supreme enemy of authoritarianism.

Hicham Alaoui is an associate researcher at the Weatherhead Centre, Harvard University, and the author of Journal d'un prince banni: Demain, le Maroc, Grasset, Paris, 2014.

(1) All notes are by the editorial team. See Nabil Mouline, Le Califat: Histoire politique de l'islam, Flammarion, Paris, 2016.

(2) Rudolph Peters, Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam: A Reader, Markus Wiener Publishers, 'Princeton Series on the Middle East', Princeton, 1996.

(3) Alain Gresh, 'Shadow of the army over Egypt's revolution', Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, August 2013.

(4) Marie Kostrz, 'Hizbullah's mission in Syria', Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, April 2016.

(5) Gilbert Achcar, 'The Saudi predicament', Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, March 2018.

The aftershocks of the Arab Spring

Political earthquake ripped fabric of authoritarianism
March 2020

Almost a decade after the 2011-12 Arab uprisings, protest movements across the region are demanding an end to existing power structures, a goal they cannot achieve without directly engaging in politics. And throughout the Arab world a new regional line-up is replacing old sectarian rivalries.

Scientists know that aftershocks are often more damaging than the quakes they follow. The 2011-12 Arab Spring was a political earthquake that ripped deep fissures in the fabric of authoritarianism across the Arab world; it signified the power of popular movements when unshackled by fear. In 2019 we witnessed its greatest aftershock, as a second wave of unrest shook governments and unsettled the region.

The protests unleashed by recent events in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Sudan are the logical amplification of the Arab Spring. They serve as the latest evidence that the region's societies refuse to capitulate in the face of economic and political injustice. Of course their opponents, the authoritarian regimes, are equally committed to maintaining power, adapting to each struggle in order to survive.

The Arab world's structural factors have remained constant since

2011-12, and feed into today's aftershocks. The first is the youth of the region's population: a third of the Arab world is under 15, and another third between 15 and 29. For the past decade the Arab world has seen its largest and most educated youth generation come of age, one that is typified by its deep immersion in social media and command of online technologies.

The second constant is economic: development is lagging. Outside the wealthiest Gulf states, most Arab countries have seen their overall unemployment and poverty rates worsen since the Arab Spring. The current Arab youth unemployment rate, according to the World Bank, is 27% –the highest regional figure in the world [World Bank]. The desire to emigrate from Arab countries, mostly for economic reasons, has reached historically high levels. In the latest 2018 survey by the *Arab Barometer* (1), a third or more of respondents in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia reported wishing to leave their country, especially the young: a staggering 70% of Moroccans aged 18-29 want to leave. Governments do little to halt this outflow, using it to get rid of young people likely to protest over their situation.

The third structural cause of resentment is the lack of progress in governance. The paucity of democratic politics, outside of Tunisia, has translated into a deepening marginalisation of the masses. Many people perceive corruption to be endemic, and believe getting a job or access to decent services requires signing up to cronyism rather than personal merit.

A landscape of protests

On the activist side, several new trends have emerged over the past year. First, popular movements now understand that just toppling a leader does not guarantee regime change, particularly if military

and security institutions still command their domains of power and the underlying rules of the political game remain untouched. They are not asking for hastily convened elections: Algerian and Sudanese activists, for instance, are keen to avoid the mistakes of the 2011 Egyptian revolution (2); they want the entire underlying systems of authoritarian rule to be dismantled.

The protesters also have a more critical awareness of the power, and the limitations, of information technology. Once, social networks permitted them to escape censorship and state repression. Now, they also allow them to express engagement and carry on virtual, yet permanent, struggles against the state, deploying fierce criticism, artistry and humour to delegitimize politicians and government institutions. These online campaigns are most apparent in Algeria and Lebanon –through protesters there have also taken to the streets– but they have also erupted in countries perceived by the West as calmer, like Morocco and Jordan. Social media, then, has evolved from a form of escapism into a permanent battleground between the state and part of society. One major inconvenience for the protesters is that the authorities also use the Internet and social networks to disseminate propaganda and to identify, and repress, their most active opponents.

Finally, activists have moved further away from grand ideologies. The Arab Spring was marked by disenchantment with the great 'ism's' –pan-Arabism, Islamism, socialism and nationalism. Mass movements have become inured to promises of utopia, preferring quotidian struggles to improve their governments. The aftershocks of 2011-12 have encouraged this evolution by ending the philosophical romance with democracy. Now, opposition forces demand first of all a dismantling of the entire structure of the old political economy, which engenders inequality and injustice. Women also play a more central role in new popular movements today.

Across the barricades

Authoritarian regimes have learned lessons from the last decade, too. The fates of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Ahmed Ali Saleh of Yemen sent the message that engaging in democratic manoeuvres was dangerous. When popular movements attack the system, the winning strategy for governments is no longer to tolerate dissent in the hope that showing goodwill can buy time. Rather, the rational response is continued repression.

The fate of exiled Saudi dissenters shows how far governments will now go to suppress all threats. This new repressive trend is fueled by a perverse realization among regimes: *they can get away with it*. The 'international community' may castigate human rights violations, but foreign powers have become complacent over how Arab states treat democratic opposition. The Sissi regime in Egypt remains a valued western ally; it has not been held to account over the overthrow of an elected government, the killing of a thousand protesters at demonstrations in Cairo's Rabaa al-Adawiya Square in 2013 (3), or the death of the former president, Mohamed Morsi, under suspicious circumstances during his trial in June 2019.

The assassination of Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018 left Saudi relations with the rest of the world unperturbed. Assad remains in power in Syria despite the carnage of the civil war. In 2011 French foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie's offer of aid to the Tunisian government created a scandal in January 2011. Now, France's support for UN mediation in Libya and its simultaneous arming of General Khalifa Haftar's army go virtually unnoticed.

Sudan is the exception. Its response to the Arab Spring has been unique, and peaceful negotiation may open a path to democracy:

the scale of the protests has allowed opposition leaders to rally popular opinion, and the government has no international backing. What distinguishes Sudan is the strength of its civil society and trade unions and the willingness of activists to engage the military leadership in formal political negotiations. NGOs as well as unions have been happy to get involved in politics for decades.

In contrast, a key feature of the recent aftershocks in Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon is 'get out-ism' (*dégagisme*) a desire to remove all political elites. Yet this radical demand has not been accompanied by the building of political structures that would enable negotiation with the regime: activists remain aloof from the political arena, fearful of being discredited by any contact with ruling elites. They are also committed to horizontal organisation, which prevents leaders and spokespeople from emerging. The lack of leadership began as an asset –if only because it limits the efficacy of repression– but now undermines the possibility of ending the crisis. *Dégagisme* can lead to a stalemate, until one side blinks.

Moreover, popular movements do not always have economic leverage to exert pressure on those in power: the Algerian and Iraqi governments are dependent on exports of hydrocarbons, produced by industries that are at a sociological and geographical distance from society. The Hirak (popular movement) in each of these countries cannot touch the economic heart of the regime.

Sunni-Shia narrative loses appeal

Beyond the Arab Spring's lessons to governments and oppositions, the sectarian landscape and geopolitical situation have evolved. The struggles between state and society today are no longer taking place so much in a context of rivalry between counter-revolutionary Sunnism, embodied in some Gulf states, and Iran and its allies.

The counter-revolutionary bloc under Saudi-Emirati leadership, mobilizing swiftly to stop the Arab Spring, magnified sectarian conflicts in order to fragment societies and conflate democratic opposition with Iran, which it portrayed as the archenemy, and its subordinates. The Iran-led axis –linking Tehran with Hezbollah, the Assad regime, the Houthis in Yemen and Iraqi militias– fed into this dynamic. Sunni chauvinism, embodied in the Saudi-Emirati nexus, acted as a convenient foil in different national conflicts, and justified supporting Shia-aligned actors.

Now, however, this regional strategy has fractured. The sectarian narrative has lost its appeal among youth activists: in Iraq and Lebanon, dégagisme is targeting ruling elites of all confessions. In Iraq, Shia protesters have even attacked Iran's diplomatic missions (4). The game has changed for the Iranian regime, which is now facing challenges both at home –with regular demonstrations against the regime– and within its sphere of influence abroad.

The Saudi-Emirati bloc's counter-revolutionary campaign has hit a wall. Providing financial support to favoured political factions and rulers has not guaranteed client states remain stable, as Egypt has proven. Gulf aid did not enable Sissi to impose a new model of governance combining authoritarianism, rapid economic development and political stability. Instead, Egypt, where the army has become a major player in every sector of the economy, has become an anti-model that no other Arab country wishes to emulate.

The failures of the Sunni coalition expose the Saudi regime's over-reach. The latest example is the hostility in many Arab capitals towards Donald Trump's 'deal of the century' (see 'A hate plan, not a peace plan', in this issue). The heavy investments made by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MBS) have failed to sweeten the pill of a plan that answers the Israeli right's dreams. Another Saudi failure, the Yemen war, has turned into a quagmire with

tragic humanitarian consequences, and has not netted any strategic victory. Rather, it has revealed the kingdom's own military weaknesses and failures in projecting hard power abroad.

Domestically, Saudi Arabia's goal of diversifying its economy away from hydrocarbons is far from being achieved. International investors did not greet Aramco's public offering at the end of 2019 with the expected enthusiasm; it seems rather to have been an extension of the political pressure displayed in November 2017, when many Saudi VIPs were detained in Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel and released only after making substantial contributions to the Saudi treasury coffers (5). In December 2019, after repeated prevarications over the Aramco offer price, many Saudi investors were pressured to buy shares, putting up their own assets as collateral. The result is not privatization and diversification, but a deepening of the state presence within the economy.

The Sunni counter-revolutionary bloc must also contend with fundamental changes in US geopolitical strategy. The Arab world no longer figures as prominently in Washington's grand strategy as a superpower as it once did. Thanks to alternative suppliers, the US economy and even global markets can weather any interruption of Middle East oil production. Further, armed threats from the region, such as ISIS and Iran, are not considered existential threats, as Al-Qaeda was once construed. The American public has no more appetite for Middle East interventions, except in the case of Iran attacking Israel.

Sunset of American hegemony

For this reason, the Trump administration has all but abandoned its role as the Gulf's protector against Iran. The US assassination of the Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani in January was driven

more by a desire to appear strong, faced with Iraqi unrest threatening the US embassy in Baghdad. Until then, the US had refused to engage in military operations against Iran, despite repeated provocations, including the Revolutionary Guards' seizure of oil tankers in the Gulf, the downing of a US drone and an attack on Saudi oil refineries. The US has also been passive in the face of Turkish aggression in northeast Syria, abandoning its Kurdish allies.

The US has entered a Jacksonian phase of its foreign policy, willing to intervene overseas only to defend its homeland security, without desiring any long-term entanglements. This sunset of American hegemony has forced Saudi Arabia and Iran to draw similar conclusions. Saudi Arabia now recognizes American support is no longer unconditional; and Iran grasps the limits of its own influence and capacity for regional disruption, since attacking the Saudi oil refineries has barely affected global energy prices. An accidental chain reaction of conflict is still possible around the issue of Israel's security. It is also possible that limited conflicts will continue between the US and Iran. These will contribute to regional disruption, without becoming a major conflict with open fighting between US and Iranian forces.

The regional order that defined the Middle East in the 2010s is reconfiguring according to a new logic. Saudi Arabia is now discreetly backpedaling on the embargo it imposed on Qatar in 2017, which was its biggest foreign policy blunder in a generation; and the UAE has begun withdrawing its military commitments in Yemen. Both are also more open to engaging with Iran directly in hopes of defusing regional tensions. That does not mean they will abandon their rapprochement with Israel, sought primarily for security reasons. Israeli defense and surveillance technology, including software surveillance, is especially coveted within this marriage of convenience. So too is the ability of Israel's military to strike at the interests of Iran and its allies, no matter where.

The decline of American hegemony can also be seen in Trump's 'deal of the century' in January. The US has always supported Israel; now it has clearly abandoned all pretence of mediating between the parties, in order to allow the Israeli right to end the matter.

Saudi Arabia, its regional partners and Iran have become aware of the unsustainability of brinkmanship and the irrationality of the latent conflict in the Arabian Gulf. Their geopolitical confrontation has shifted, with their rivalries now playing out in the eastern Mediterranean rim. Two new alliances are forming. On one side stand Egypt, Israel, Cyprus and Greece, which are bound by common interests in exploiting offshore natural gas reserves. Their maritime presence and military collaborations are growing denser.

Libya a zone of lawlessness

Opposing this bloc are Qatar, Turkey and the Libyan government in Tripoli. In this nascent great game, Libya represents the last arena where violence can play out by proxy. It has become a zone of lawlessness, with drones and mercenaries occupying the battlefront and foreign forces openly supporting one camp or another. In many ways, Libya may be the main victim of the reconfiguration of geopolitical rivalries in North Africa and the Middle East. Those rivalries have effectively removed Libya from the Maghreb and made it part of the Levantine question.

In this reconfiguration, the Russian factor is unique. Russia, which is present in Syria and active in Libya, pursues a counter-revolutionary impulse, but this does not come from a global strategy. Moscow sees some authoritarian regimes as partners that serve its interests in specific situations. Its toolkit includes low-cost yet highly effective military interventions that utilize small bases and often private contractors. Indeed, its own Wagner Group is succeeding where the American firm Blackwater failed, with operations extending from

Syria to the Central African Republic. Moscow does not have a long-term vision for the regional order, intervening within existing conflicts in order to extract geostrategic benefits at very low cost. The Russian vision for the Middle East is therefore tactical rather than strategic.

Except for Sudan, all these arenas of contestation are at a stalemate. This raises the familiar question of whether the monarchies offer the best recipe for political stability, a point originally made during the Arab Spring, after the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and his counterpart Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. The argument was that monarchies had deep cultural and social roots in their national societies, and therefore commanded greater legitimacy. As political institutions, they were also supple and flexible. Standing above the fray of formal politics, they could mediate conflicts and provide leadership during crises.

Jordan and Morocco are unlike the princely Gulf states, where political activity is limited –except Kuwait, which has an elected parliament. Both have parliamentary elections, and long fuelled the argument in favour of monarchies in the Arab world. They combined active royal power with a plurality of political parties, some of which claimed to be opposition parties, though without going so far as to challenge the monarchy. But over the last few years, their mode of governance has remained unchanged. And neither the Jordanian nor the Moroccan monarchy has exhibited the reactivity and flexibility that once helped them defuse crises, notably by coopting part of the political opposition. In Jordan, the ongoing presence of nearly a million Syrian refugees and existential fears surrounding the Palestinian impasse have limited the opposition's ability to act. Morocco faces no such external threats.

Activists in Morocco have learned there is a glass ceiling to dissent –they must not openly call into question the monarchy itself.

So long as the ceiling is respected, the monarchy can adapt to any given crisis and continue in its old conservative ways. To use an economic metaphor, a product that enjoys a monopoly can afford never to change. Once a competing product enters the market, then it must change to survive. Now, new protest movements in Morocco are going beyond their self-imposed limits by desacralizing the monarchy. Anti-monarchical sentiments are already being expressed. Once the status quo becomes untenable, the question for the monarchy will be how to utilize what remains of its legitimacy and political resources to contain republican currents.

Hicham Alaoui is an associate researcher at the Weatherhead Center, Harvard University, and the author of Journal d'un prince banni: Demain, le Maroc, Grasset, Paris, 2014. All notes are by the editorial team.

(1) 'Arabs are losing faith in religious parties and leaders', Arab Barometer, 5 December 2019.

(2) See Alain Gresh, 'Shadow of the army over Egypt's revolution', Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, August 2013.

(3) 'Egypt: Security forces used excessive lethal force', Human Rights Watch, New York, 19 August 2013.

(4) See Feurat Alani, 'Mobilising for a new political system in Iraq', Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, January 2020.

(5) See Ibrahim Warde, 'Saudi Arabia's future for sale', Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, December 2017.

25 YEARS- 25 IDEAS analyzes the dream of democracy, the horizon of freedom, and a life of dignity as shared by a whole generation in the Arab world, those who came of intellectual age from the end of the Cold War until today's Arab Spring era. This is a collection of articles from *Le Monde Diplomatique,* published between 1995 and 2020, that addresses issues central to this historic phase: political Islam, secularism, human rights, democratic transition, terrorism, and geopolitics in the Arab world, all studied in the context of extraordinary change. What underlay these contributions is the rich, personal experience of a practitioner. The author, Hicham Alaoui, is not only a scholarly researcher, and a graduate of Princeton, Stanford, and Oxford, but also a privileged witness of regional developments. His engagement with proponents of democracy, human rights, and reform has allowed him to describe the momentous actors and dynamic forces reshaping the Middle East with acuity.

25 YEARS- 25 IDEAS therefore aims to provide historical testimony. It constitutes a reference for the general public, as well as a resource for researchers on the Arab world who wish to deepen their knowledge of crucial issues and the dilemmas that have confronted a generation of Arab democrats.