

Freedom and Justice in Islam

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By common consent among historians, the modern history of the Middle East begins in the year 1798, when the French Revolution arrived in Egypt in the form of a small expeditionary force led by a young general called Napoleon Bonaparte—who conquered and then ruled it for a while with appalling ease. General Bonaparte—he wasn't yet Emperor—proclaimed to the Egyptians that he had come to them on behalf of a French Republic built on the principles of liberty and equality.

We know something about the reactions to this proclamation from the extensive literature of the Middle Eastern Arab world. The idea of equality posed no great problem. Equality is very basic in Islamic belief: All true believers are equal. Of course, that still leaves three “inferior” categories of people—slaves, unbelievers and women. But in general, the concept of equality was understood. Islam never developed anything like the caste system of India to the east or the privileged aristocracies of Christian Europe to the west. Equality was something they knew, respected, and in large measure practiced. But liberty was something else.

As used in Arabic at that time, liberty was not a political but a legal term: You were free if you were not a slave. The word liberty was not used as we use it in the Western world, as a metaphor for good government. So the idea of a republic founded on principles of freedom caused some puzzlement. Some years later an Egyptian sheikh—Sheikh Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, who went to Paris as chaplain to the first group of Egyptian students sent to Europe—wrote a book about his adventures and explained his discovery of the meaning of freedom. He wrote that when the French talk about freedom they mean what Muslims mean when they talk about justice. By equating freedom with justice, he opened a whole new phase in the political and public discourse of the Arab world, and then, more broadly, the Islamic world.

Is Western-Style Freedom Transferable?

What is the possibility of freedom in the Islamic world, in the Western sense of the word? If you look at the current literature, you will find two views common in the United States and Europe. One of them holds that Islamic peoples are incapable of decent, civilized government. Whatever the West does, Muslims will be ruled by corrupt tyrants. Therefore the aim of our foreign policy should be to insure that they are *our* tyrants rather than someone else's—friendly rather than hostile tyrants. This point of view is very much favored in departments of state and foreign offices and is generally known, rather surprisingly, as the “pro-Arab” view. It is, of course, in no sense pro-Arab. It shows ignorance of the Arab past, contempt for the Arab present, and unconcern for the Arab future.

The second common view is that Arab ways are different from our ways. They must be allowed to develop in accordance with their cultural principles, but it is possible for them—as for anyone else, anywhere in the world, with discreet help from outside and most specifically from the United States—to develop democratic institutions of a kind. This view is known as the “imperialist” view and has been vigorously denounced and condemned as such.

In thinking about these two views, it is helpful to step back and consider what Arab and Islamic society was like once and how it has been transformed in the modern age. The idea that how that society is now is how it has always been is totally false. The dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in Iraq or the Assad family in Syria or the more friendly dictatorship of Mubarak in Egypt—all of these have no roots whatsoever in the Arab or in the Islamic past. Let me quote to you from a letter written in 1786—three years before the French Revolution—by Mssr. Count de Choiseul-Gouffier, the French ambassador in Istanbul, in which he is trying to explain why he is making rather slow progress with the tasks entrusted to him by his government in dealing with the Ottoman government. “Here,” he says, “things are not as in France where the king is sole master and does as he pleases.” “Here,” he says, “the sultan has to consult.” He has to consult with the former holders of high offices, with the leaders of various groups and so on. And this is a slow process. This scenario is something radically different than the common image of Middle Eastern government today. And it is a description that ceased to be true because of a number of changes that occurred.

Modernization and Nazi and Soviet Influence

The first of these changes is what one might call modernization. This was undertaken not by

imperialists, for the most part, but by Middle Eastern rulers who had become painfully aware that their societies were undeveloped compared with the advanced Western world. These rulers decided that what they had to do was to modernize or Westernize. Their intentions were good, but the consequences were often disastrous. What they did was to increase the power of the state and the ruler enormously by placing at his disposal the whole modern apparatus of control, repression and indoctrination.

At the same time, which was even worse, they limited or destroyed those forces in the traditional society that had previously limited the autocracy of the ruler. In the traditional society there were established orders—the bazaar merchants, the scribes, the guilds, the country gentry, the military establishment, the religious establishment, and so on. These were powerful groups in society, whose heads were not appointed by the ruler but arose from within the groups. And no sultan, however powerful, could do much without maintaining some relationship with these different orders in society. This is not democracy as we currently use that word, but it is certainly limited, responsible government. And the system worked. Modernization ended that. A new ruling class emerged, ruling from the center and using the apparatus of the state for its purposes.

That was the first stage in the destruction of the old order. The second stage we can date with precision. In the year 1940, the government of France surrendered to the Axis and formed a collaborationist government in a place called Vichy. The French colonial empire was, for the most part, beyond the reach of the Nazis, which meant that the governors of the French colonies had a free choice: To stay with Vichy or to join Charles de Gaulle, who had set up a Free French Committee in London. The overwhelming majority chose Vichy, which meant that Syria-Lebanon—a French-mandated territory in the heart of the Arab East—was now wide open to the Nazis. The governor and his high officials in the administration in Syria-Lebanon took their orders from Vichy, which in turn took orders from Berlin.

The Nazis moved in, made a tremendous propaganda effort, and were even able to move from Syria eastwards into Iraq and for a while set up a pro-Nazi, fascist regime. It was in this period that political parties were formed that were the nucleus of what later became the Baath Party. The Western Allies eventually drove the Nazis out of the Middle East and suppressed these organizations. But the war ended in 1945, and the Allies left. A few years later the Soviets moved in, established an immensely powerful presence in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and various other countries, and introduced Soviet-style political practice. The adaptation from the Nazi model to the communist model was very simple and easy, requiring only a few minor adjustments, and it proceeded pretty well.

That is the origin of the Baath Party and of the kind of governments that we have been confronting in the Middle East in recent years. *That, as I would again repeat and emphasize, has nothing whatever to do with the traditional Arab or Islamic past*

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Wahhabism and Oil

That there has been a break with the past is a fact of which Arabs and Muslims themselves are keenly and painfully aware, and they have tried to do something about it. It is in this context that we observe a series of movements that could be described as an Islamic revival or reawakening. The first of these—founded by a theologian called Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who lived in a remote area of Najd in desert Arabia—is known as Wahhabi. Its argument is that the root of Arab-Islamic troubles lies in following the ways of the infidel. The Islamic world, it holds, has abandoned the true faith that God gave it through His prophet and His holy book, and the remedy is a return to pure, original Islam. This pure, original Islam is, of course—as is usual in such situations—a new invention with little connection to Islam as it existed in its earlier stages.

Wahhabism was dealt with fairly easily in its early years, but it acquired a new importance in the mid-1920s when two things happened: The local tribal chiefs of the House of Saud—who had been converted since the 18th century to the Wahhabi version of Islam—conquered the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. This was of immense importance, giving them huge prestige and influence in the whole Islamic world. It also gave them control of the pilgrimage, which brings millions of Muslims from the Islamic world together to the same place at the same time every year.

The other important thing that happened—also in the mid-20s—was the discovery of oil. With that, this extremist sect found itself not only in possession of Mecca and Medina, but also of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. *As a result, what would otherwise have been a lunatic fringe in a marginal country became a major force in the world of Islam*

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What is worse, its influence spreads far beyond the region. When Muslims living in Chicago or Los Angeles or Birmingham or Hamburg want to give their children some grounding in their faith and culture—a very natural, very normal thing—they turn to the traditional resources for such purposes: evening classes, weekend schools, holiday camps and the like. The problem is that

these are now overwhelmingly funded and therefore controlled by the Wahhabis, and the version of Islam that they teach is the Wahhabi version, which has thus become a major force in Muslim immigrant communities.

Let me illustrate the significance of this with one example: Germany has constitutional separation of church and state, but in the German school system they provide time for religious instruction. The state, however, does not provide teachers or textbooks. They allow time in the school curriculum for the various churches and other religious communities—if they wish—to provide religious instruction to their children, which is entirely optional. The Muslims in Germany are mostly Turks. When they reached sufficient numbers, they applied to the German government for permission to teach Islam in German schools. The German authorities agreed, but said they—the Muslims—had to provide the teachers and the textbooks. The Turks said that they had excellent textbooks, which are used in Turkey and Turkish schools, but the German authorities said no, those are government-produced textbooks; under the principle of separation of church and state, these Muslims had to produce their own. As a result, whereas in Turkish schools in Turkey, students get a modern, moderate version of Islam, in German schools, in general, they get the full Wahhabi blast. The last time I looked, twelve Turks have been arrested as members of Al-Qaeda—all twelve of them born and educated in Germany.

The Iranian Revolution and Al-Qaeda

In addition to the rising spread of Wahhabism, I would draw your attention to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The word “revolution” is much misused in the Middle East; it is used for virtually every change of government. But the Iranian Revolution was a real revolution, in the sense that the French and Russian revolutions were real revolutions. It was a massive change in the country, a massive shift of power—socially, economically, and ideologically. And like the French and Russian revolutions in their prime, it also had a tremendous impact in the world with which the Iranians shared a common universe of discourse—the world of Islam.

I remember not long after the Iranian Revolution I was visiting Indonesia and for some mysterious reason I had been invited to lecture in religious universities. I noticed in the student dorms they had pictures of Khomeini all over the place, although Khomeini—like the Iranians in general—is a Shiite, and the Indonesians are Sunnis. Indonesians generally showed little interest in what was happening in the Middle East. But this was something important. And the Iranian Revolution has gone through various familiar phases—familiar from the French and Russian revolutions—such as the conflicts between the moderates and the extremists. *I would say that the Iranian Revolution is now entering the Stalinist phase, and its impact all over the Islamic world has been enormous*

The third and most recent phase of the Islamic revival is that associated with the name *Al-Qaeda* —the organization headed by Osama bin Laden. Here I would remind you of the events toward the end of the 20th century: the defeat of the Russians in Afghanistan, the withdrawal of the defeated armies into Russia, the collapse and breakdown of the Soviet Union. We are accustomed to regard that as a Western, or more specifically, an American, victory in the Cold War. In the Islamic world, it was nothing of the kind. It was Muslim victory in a *Jihad*

. And, if we are fair about it, we must admit that this interpretation of what happened does not lack plausibility. In the mountains of Afghanistan, which the Soviets had conquered and had been trying to rule, the Taliban were able to inflict one defeat after another on the Soviet forces, eventually driving the Red Army out of the country to defeat and collapse.

Thanks to modern communications and the modern media, we are quite well informed about how Al-Qaeda perceives things. Osama bin Laden is very articulate, very lucid, and I think on the whole very honest in the way he explains things. As he sees it, and as his followers see it, there has been an ongoing struggle between the two world religions—Christianity and Islam—which began with the advent of Islam in the 7th century and has been going on ever since. The Crusades were one aspect, but there were many others. It is an ongoing struggle of attack and counter-attack, conquest and reconquest, Jihad and Crusade, ending so it seems in a final victory of the West with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire—the last of the great Muslim states—and the partition of most of the Muslim world between the Western powers. As Osama bin Laden puts it: “In this final phase of the ongoing struggle, the world of the infidels was divided between two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union. Now we have defeated and destroyed the more difficult and the more dangerous of the two. Dealing with the pampered and effeminate Americans will be easy.” And then followed what has become the familiar description of the Americans and the usual litany and recitation of American defeats and retreats: Vietnam, Beirut, Somalia, one after another. The general theme was: “They can't take it. Hit them and they'll run. All you have to do is hit harder.” This seemed to receive final confirmation during the 1990s when one attack after another on embassies, warships, and barracks brought no response beyond angry words and expensive missiles misdirected to remote and uninhabited places, and in some places—as in Beirut and Somalia—prompt retreats.

What happened on 9/11 was seen by its perpetrators and sponsors as the culmination of the previous phase and the inauguration of the next phase—taking the war into the enemy camp to achieve final victory. The response to 9/11 came as a nasty surprise. They were expecting more of the same—bleating and apologies—instead of which they got a vigorous reaction, first in

Afghanistan and then in Iraq. And as they used to say in Moscow: It is no accident, comrades, that there has been no successful attack in the United States since then. But if one follows the discourse, one can see that the debate in this country since then has caused many of the perpetrators and sponsors to return to their previous diagnosis. Because remember, they have no experience, and therefore no understanding, of the free debate of an open society. What we see as free debate, they see as weakness, fear and division. Thus they prepare for the final victory, the final triumph and the final Jihad.

Conclusion

Let's spend a moment or two defining what we mean by freedom and democracy. There is a view sometimes expressed that "democracy" means the system of government evolved by the English-speaking peoples. Any departure from that is either a crime to be punished or a disease to be cured. I beg to differ from that point of view. Different societies develop different ways of conducting their affairs, and they do not need to resemble ours. And let us remember, after all, that American democracy after the War of Independence was compatible with slavery for three-quarters of a century and with the disenfranchisement of women for longer than that. Democracy is not born like the Phoenix. It comes in stages, and the stages and processes of development will differ from country to country, from society to society. The French cherish the curious illusion that they invented democracy, but since the great revolution of 1789, they have had two monarchies, two empires, two dictatorships, and at the last count, five republics. And I'm not sure that they've got it right yet.

There are, as I've tried to point out, elements in Islamic society which could well be conducive to democracy. And there are encouraging signs at the present moment—what happened in Iraq, for example, with millions of Iraqis willing to stand in line to vote, knowing that they were risking their lives, is a quite extraordinary achievement. It shows great courage, great resolution. Don't be misled by what you read in the media about Iraq. The situation is certainly not good, but there are redeeming features in it. The battle isn't over. It's still very difficult. There are still many major problems to overcome. There is a bitter anti-Western feeling which derives partly and increasingly from our support for what they see as tyrannies ruling over them.

It's interesting that pro-American feeling is strongest in countries with anti-American governments. I've been told repeatedly by Iranians that there is no country in the world where pro-American feeling is stronger, deeper and more widespread than Iran. I've heard this from so many different Iranians—including some still living in Iran—that I believe it. When the American planes were flying over Afghanistan, the story was that many Iranians put signs on their roofs in English reading, "This way, please."

So there is a good deal of pro-Western and even specifically pro-American feeling. But the anti-American feeling is strongest in those countries that are ruled by what we are pleased to call “friendly governments.” And it is those, of course, that are the most tyrannical and the most resented by their own people. The outlook at the moment is, I would say, very mixed. I think that the cause of developing free institutions—along their lines, not ours—is possible. One can see signs of its beginning in some countries. At the same time, the forces working against it are very powerful and well entrenched. *And one of the greatest dangers is that on their side, they are firm and convinced and resolute. Whereas on our side, we are weak and undecided and irresolute.*

And in such a combat, it is not difficult to see which side will prevail.

I think that the effort is difficult and the outcome uncertain, but I think the effort must be made. Either we bring them freedom, or they destroy us.

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