

## DEMOCRACY AND THE ARAB WORLD

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In the pursuit of spreading democracy (constitutional democracy) in the Arab world, a worthy goal in abstract terms, we should start by defining democracy. I found it more enlightening and necessary to dismiss certain false perceptions about what democracy is, before determining what a democracy might mean to us, let alone other cultures.

Is democracy a system of one person, one vote? If so, then by definition, the United States, when it was established, was not a democracy since it did not allow women or people of color the right to vote.

Is democracy a system in which equal participation of all citizens in selecting their laws and government applies regardless of religion (separation of church and state), race or ethnic origin? If this were so, then Britain, Ireland, Israel and India, which are states defined as democracies with a particular religion enshrined in their founding (e.g., Israel is a Jewish state), then these states would not be considered democracies.

Is democracy a system that is necessary for promoting and maintaining freedom for all its citizens? Again the answer would be no. The United States, when it was established enslaved its African-American population for over one hundred plus years.

So what is democracy? How can we in the Western World embark on a worthy goal of spreading *democracy* around the Arab World without acknowledging that we did not develop into our present-day democratic system overnight, and that our present day democratic system was never perfect and will never be perfect? A constitutional democratic system is an ever-evolving, culturally sensitive system of

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government and can go through regression as well as advancement as the effects of present day circumstances dictate. The same criterion applies to the evolution of democracy in the Arab World just as it applied to the evolution of democracy with the passing of time in the United States. A perfect one-stop democracy is not an achievable goal.

If we in the Western World are to be honest with ourselves, we will acknowledge that our democratic ideals stem from our basic needs of *security, fairness and inclusiveness*. These sentiments were the inspiration for “*all Men [human beings] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. . . .*”<sup>1</sup> These are powerful words that committed our nascent republic to liberty for all, while binding us to one another in pursuit of a future where all can benefit from the shared responsibility and hard work that are the gifts of life. Our social contract promised us the right to the pursuit of happiness. This right, however, does not stand on its own. We cannot pursue the right if it infringes on the rights of others or on the cohesiveness of our communities. Our Constitution does not give us the right to steal in the pursuit of happiness. Rather, it implies that in such a worthy pursuit—the pursuit of happiness—all members of our community will benefit and will be secure.

Here is where we should start searching on how to approach the Arab World. When we extend a helping hand to the people of this region, we should aim to help relieve them of their present day injustices and lack of freedoms towards a more promising future; in that sense we can win their hearts and minds. Too many flowery words and promises in our histories went unfulfilled. Too often, the West compromised on the rights of freedom and the pursuit of happiness of the people of the Middle East. We (the West) did so in the mistaken assumption that this was in our best interest. This assumption has come back to hurt us. We occupied the Middle East after World War I and placed the people there under Mandates, (The Sikes-Picot agreements, 1916) because we were sure they could not govern themselves. We divided their Arab culture into different countries and installed our chosen leaders within each state so that we could still dictate events, even after we left. We called those arrangements their “independence.”

We then bribed those leaders to *buy* natural resources at the price and quantity we determined. We protected those leaders from each and every attempt by the people they ruled when those citizens revolted,

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1. THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE prmb1. (U.S. 1776).

against those dictators, in their pursuit of freedom and happiness. Most importantly, *we were accomplices in stopping the natural evolution of their societies from single, one-man rule towards a more democratic and free system (e.g. Iran in the 1950s and Saudi Arabia, 1979).*

In that light, the effects on the Arab World community were extremely negative. In any society, the evolution into a democratic system of government had to maneuver through a maze of conditions and restrictions that were imposed by the cultural mores and traditions of each particular civilization. (*Choosing between monarchy and a Republic for the United States' emerging system of government is one example. The Great Compromise on the power of States is another.*<sup>2</sup>) This is an inevitable exercise on the path to democratic evolution. The path can be extremely difficult if additional restrictions are imposed from outside that emerging society. These additional restrictions could cause the failure of the ultimate goal for a better, more equitable and fair future. If, for example, we demand the separation of church and state as a price for our support of the new constitution in Iraq, we will be condemning the process to failure since religion is an essential part of that society's definition of itself. Furthermore, it will indicate to the people of Iraq that they are not free in the pursuit of their freedom since they will have to first meet *our* vision of how *we* see a future Iraq. Especially problematic is the example sighted above: that all recognized democracies today do not have a separation of church and state as the basis of their democracies.

Another pitfall to watch out for as we proceed with helping emerging democracies is the *conflict between democracy and market economics*. We cannot go on selling free market economics as a synonym of democracy. Simply put, free market economics reward the individual while democracy's benefits are for society, in the aggregate. Corporate structure is hierarchical while democracy's structure is pluralistic. If we continue to impose our economic theories at the expense of democratic ideals, the concluding chapter in this saga will be the clash of civilizations. We can no longer ignore that the Arab World has learned the historic lesson that we in the West are not as interested in helping them build their democracies as much as we are interested in using that process to rig the outcome in the economic sphere. *The effects of democracy and free market economics* on the Arab Muslim World, if viewed through a general ledger and compared to the existing

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2. U.S. SENATE, A GREAT COMPROMISE: JULY 16, 1787, [http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/A\\_Great\\_Compromise.htm](http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/A_Great_Compromise.htm) (last visited December 2, 2005).

status quo, can be very instructive.

The status quo in the Arab World provides financial and personal security through age-old hierarchical ties between the individual, his extended family, and ties to other families and tribes. If democracy is to take root, and free market economics is to replace family connections, then democracy has to be shown as a viable alternative that can offer security as well as hope for a better future. If on the other hand these western concepts are seen to be failing their own societies (unemployment, moral decline, unsafe streets, and destruction of social safety nets) as well as being imposed on the Arab and Muslim World from the outside, then the status quo will be preferred as opposed to the insecure unknown. Democracy becomes an impossible sell if it is also used as a cover to usurp these ancient civilizations of their natural resources so as to benefit the West in the now rigged game of *free market economics*.

One other glaring fault line to avoid is the unintended competition between two societies/civilizations and who is better than whom in the promotion of freedom democracy and the pursuit of happiness. Democracy should not be seen or used as a mechanism for imposing on one civilization the values of another. This my-values-are better-than-yours argument is self-defeating. To begin with, every society/civilization, by definition, has to be committed to improving the lives of its citizens. No civilization can survive forever if it is working against its citizens' interest. We all have to get off of our high horses and acknowledge that each civilization has contributed to the advancement of the human race. We should treat each other as equals not as an adult teaching an adolescent on the lessons of life. Equal treatment is the only sure way to travel the road to free and democratic societies, each living in peace with the other.

In addition, it behooves us to remember that the values of both the Western and Arab Worlds are not all that different. They each started with Hammurabi's 14 laws, Moses' Ten Commandments, and then were amplified by the Magna Charta, the American Constitution and the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights. These values are intertwined and each culture should have pride in its contributions in that evolutionary process. This recognition can be the basis for building a future together. One based on mutual respect and with an eye on the common good.

So how can we fulfill the challenge posed by the President of the United States to assist other nations in the pursuit of a better future—their pursuit of happiness? We can start by addressing the Arab people as an equal partner in that endeavor. Additionally, we can use the

following self-evident steps:

First, do no harm. Do not destroy a society so you can save it. Too often in history this lesson gets repeated: an advanced civilization invades another, mostly for economic reasons; the occupier covets the land or its natural resources and enslaves or occupies the less advanced or defeated society. The occupied society, having been defeated in battle, succumbs to its fate. As time goes by, and life becomes harder to endure, the population rises to confront the occupier. As the situation progresses, the occupier starts to contemplate drastic measures (solutions) to the insurrection. Soon the occupier crosses the Rubicon. It determines that in order to quell this revolt, the terrorists (natives) need to be destroyed so as to return the territories to the state of “normalcy” prior to the start of this insurrection. After all, this is for the society’s own good. Who wants to live in an unsafe environment?

The fight is joined and the consequences are the destruction of the indigenous population and their living environment. The following chapters in this story can take several paths.

One road could lead to the quelling of the latest conflict for the time being only to see it rise again in the near future after the population adapts and learns new ways to make life for the occupier unbearable. This scenario usually leads to what we consider ultimately as the liberation of the indigenous culture.

On another road, the resulting violence could lead to the practical annihilation of the indigenous population and their culture. The remnants of such a culture then get assimilated into the dominant occupying culture. The Native American Indians are such an example.

On the first path, if liberation is the outcome, then the relationship between the now liberated culture and its occupying enemy goes through decades of distrust and anger. In some instances, new conflicts are developed with the old wounds acting as the motivating factor for revenge. World War I and the Treaty of Versailles are such examples. Adolph Hitler used the feelings of humiliation and defeat in Germany in his rise to power less than twenty years after the end of World War I. The only thing this scenario accomplishes, as with what happened in World War II, was the total destruction of what both civilizations have built over centuries with the accompanying loss of life that is devastating to both the occupier and the occupied.

If one examines the original goals of the occupier (improving the life of the local population, improving the occupier’s wealth, or improving of security for all), these goals, when viewed in retrospect, seem to have gone unfulfilled. In some instances, the opposite of these

goals turns out to be the outcome. Particularly when the loss of life and treasure are weighed in the balance against what some individuals might have gained as the spoils of war.

On the second path, if the destruction and assimilation of the indigenous population is the outcome, the occupying civilization has an illusion of winning. The reality is something totally different. When the soul of the culture is examined, we find deep wounds that can have negative effects on many future generations. The Native American culture is a reminder of what our ancestors did to the original inhabitants of the Americas. We may want to forget what has been done to the Native Americans in the name of our security and economic advancement, but their faces are still with us. Some deal with that through denial, refusing to see the true cost of our forefather's actions. Others try to right the wrong, but find it impossible to reverse history.

The second step in assisting other nations in their pursuit of a better future is to approach other civilizations in a humble dignified way, respecting their values and expecting respect in return. Many conflicts through history began and then progressed because of the lack of respect for one's foe. It is the nature of war that one must hate his enemy. This hate is what drives the soldier in battle and the politician in front of the pulpit. It is the fuel by which leaders demand and receive authority to go to war. Once the enemy is defined as evil, with no redeeming traits, opposition to war diminishes and compromise with the enemy can be painted as treason. The cause of the conflict becomes immaterial and total victory the only option.

If we examine how conflicts are resolved, it is instructive to note that even with total victory, such as World War II, a final resolution requires respect, such as rebuilding the societies of both our enemies, Germany and Japan. In the rebuilding process we acknowledged that both of these civilizations had a proud history of accomplishments and that each contributed to the advancement of the human civilization. We respected their accomplishments regardless of the brutality their soldiers and leaders had shown in battle. We allowed them a modicum of space to weave their future with their own lessons and traditions of the past giving them ownership and pride in the future. In paying respect to their cultures, we earned respect and admiration for our own values and accomplishments. This has resulted in over half a century of peace and economic prosperity. The humble approach works. Whereas an approach that requires your enemy to acknowledge your superiority rarely will.

Third, in helping other nations in their pursuit of a better future, offer them your historic experiences and achievements, with the

mistakes you have committed along the way. No civilization has advanced without mistakes along the way. If we are to have our accomplishments received with the admiration they deserve, acknowledging our mistakes can help others avoid making similar errors.

The notion that we have reached this state of advancement, simply by being flawless from the time of our founding fathers onward, is self-aggrandizement and lacks a factual basis. We have fought a bloody civil war, refused women the right to vote and considered African slaves to be worth three-fifths a man. Our mistakes have their roots in our founding documents. For example, slavery was an issue that the Founders could not, or would not solve. This mistake brought us the Civil War.

In pointing to our mistakes, we will be seen as a genuinely concerned party whose aim is the improvement, rather than an occupier with a hidden agenda. Relationships between nations, as between individuals, are based on trust and the belief that the other's motives are pure. We should be proud as a society that even when we made mistakes, we were able to overcome them; to prosper and advance.

Fourth, emphasize our common roots and ideals, not for credit but for binding the wounds of our recent histories.

There is no denying that our history with the Arab World is full of wounds brought on by duplicity, favoritism, and short-sighted self-interest. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the people of the Middle East look at us with uneasy apprehension. Yet, in reality, we are connected. We worship the same God. We believe in the necessity and strength of the family unit. We strive for a better future for our progeny and ourselves. If this is not enough common ground, then looking back on where our laws and beliefs come from, shows our undeniable commonality.

Part of the problem has been a denial of our common history and an exaggeration of our differences. Claiming that Allah is different than God is exactly such an example. The truth is that Allah is the exact Arabic translation of our God. When Christian Arabs pray to God in Arabic, they use the word Allah, meaning "God." The same God of Moses that all the three monotheistic religions—Christians, Muslims and Jews—believe in. So if we deny, exaggerate and misrepresent our commonality, we will play right into the hands of those enemies of coexistence that we say we are fighting. Acknowledging our common values will bind the wounds of the past and just as surely defeat our enemies.

Fifth, let the other nation proceed on the road to freedom and the pursuit of happiness at their own pace and with their cultural identity decorating its winding path.

And, sixth, ask only for peaceful coexistence as the ultimate gift for both societies.

Lofty goals need down-to-earth approaches. The only hope for humankind lies in understanding each other while remaining different. At the most basic level, our needs and challenges, are the same in every civilization. It is not the answers to our questions that are different, only the roads we travel along to get those answers.