

Traditions of Liberalism in the Middle East

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Jane Kinninmont

This particular event came out of a discussion some of us were having here, inspired by the recent publication of a book of memoirs by Tawfiq al-Suwaydi, a leading liberal prime minister and statesman from Iraq. We were talking about the rich tradition that Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries have of liberalism, which is perhaps something not so well known today – especially in the West, where perceptions are so often dominated by pictures of authoritarianism and also of Islamism. We thought it would be interesting to bring together a range of experts to talk about this intellectual history of the region. How is it still relevant today, if it is still relevant, how will the past thinkers of the region contribute to the Middle East's future?

I'm delighted to be joined here by this distinguished panel. Our first speaker, Dr Ali Allawi, will be known to all of you: the author of several books, most recently a biography of King Faisal of Iraq. He was also Iraq's first postwar civilian minister of defence and has held several cabinet-level positions in Iraq, most recently the ministry of finance. He is going to tell us a little about the current situation in Iraq in the context of the recent elections, and then give us more of an insight into Iraq's intellectual history and the country's liberal tradition.

Thank you very much. Over to you, Dr Ali.

Ali Allawi

Thank you very much. I don't know that being in a cabinet that is by and large illiberal allows you to talk about liberalism in the Middle East, but if you excuse me that I'll try to get to the heart of it.

The whole idea, the whole notion, of a liberal Middle East – we have to think of it in terms of whether it's a moral liberalism that we're talking about, an intellectual liberalism or a programmatic liberalism. Looking at it as a kind of mirror image of the Western (particularly the Anglo-Saxon) experience, I think you can safely say that there is not much of a liberal tradition in the Middle East, in the sense of defining liberalism as 'the enhancement of liberty for the individual and for small groups' – this is quoting Lord Acton. Liberty being defined as 'respect for individual rights and for minority privilege'.

So these terms that were part and parcel of the political experience of this country and the United States and other English-speaking parts of the world, which then migrated to the continent, this tradition cannot be replicated in the modern Arab world in these specific terms. You can say that they may have been a precursor or a potential precursor to a similar type of tradition in the latter parts of the Ottoman Empire. Maybe there was a kind of Ottoman creep in the beginning of the 20th century towards some kind of – not a liberal order, but at least liberal protagonists, such as the Entente Liberal party and so on. Maybe it could have worked in the context of the Ottoman Empire, given that it was a multi-ethnic, multi-religious affair.

But then the rise of the CUP and war and so on really did not leave much of a trace in the Arab world, certainly not in Iraq, after 1918. The prevailing ideologies of the nation-state systems of the Middle East did not include liberalism. They may have included parliamentary democracy or institutional forms that would be part and parcel of a liberal order, but they did not have in it the makings of a liberal political consciousness.

In Iraq, nationalism and patriotism were the prevailing ideologies, I would say, until the 1950s, encased by a kind of development-oriented form of quasi-authoritarianism, which then collapsed after 1958. So liberalism in the Anglo-Saxon understanding of it, I would say, took a backseat as an ideology and as a programme. A kind of creeping authoritarianism which then led to full-blown dictatorship and despotism emerged in the 1960s and subsequently.

The first Iraqi constitution – I'm sure Charles will talk more about that, but it had kind of liberal statements within it. There were maybe some liberal moments in the Faisalian period in Iraq, between 1921 and 1933.

However, I think if you look at liberalism as a moral programme rather than as an intellectual and political programme, I think there were the makings of liberal politicians and statesmen in the monarchical period – primarily, I think, because it is implicit, as it were, within the ethical standards or the ethical frames of the old notable classes. Within that group I'd include Tawfiq al-Suwaydi. He is a liberal not so much by intellectual preoccupations, but a liberal also because that's by and large the nature of the order from which he emanated. So it's a kind of aristocratic liberalism, not too different from Tocqueville's – not necessarily part and parcel of a political programme.

There were perhaps the seeds of a liberal political party in the early Ahali movement, which then transfigured itself into the National Democratic Party. But that was much more, I think in the final analysis, a social democratic movement rather than a specifically liberal order. The political parties of the late monarchical party – there was one called Hizb al-Ahrar, which was headed initially by Tawfiq al-Suwaydi, but most of the others were either very minor affairs, mainly left-wing parties, as well as the two main parties associated with the ruling political class.

So liberalism as a specific current in pre-1958 Iraq may have evolved. I think it could have evolved if the monarchy was allowed to evolve and develop. You can say, well, the same, or a simulacrum, of that monarchy existed in Jordan, and Jordan has not developed a liberal political order. But certainly the liberals in Jordan are far, far larger in number, percentage-wise, than they are in Iraq.

But liberalism as a force represented by individuals – and I think the two great individuals of the liberal political order in Iraq before 1958 were Tawfiq al-Suwaydi and Muhammad Fadhel al-Jamali. From an entirely different spectrum but both of them pushing for a meaning of liberalism in the context of its definition, as it were, in 19th-century terms.

Of course we had the dictatorship and the post-2003 order which very soon, as you all know, devolved into a kind of ethno-sectarian framework, which completely marginalized the liberals. There were one or two liberals, or so-called liberals, in the Governing Council but they had very little effect subsequently in the political equation of the country. Every election we've had in the period since 2004-05, until the most recent one, the liberals as a group were really insignificant. In the last elections there were no liberal parties as such. Whatever passes for a liberal order had, in quantitative terms, a very poor showing. The Wataniya party, which is headed by Ayad Allawi, is not so much a liberal party as mainly a party of secularists who don't necessarily proclaim the nostrums, as it were, of liberal political democracy. They got 20 seats. Tayyar al-Madani, which is the Civil Order Trend, they got about 5 seats. This is primarily an offshoot of the Communist Party. So if you take both of these as representing some form of liberal consciousness, you end up with maybe 25 seats out of a total of maybe 330-340 seats, so less than 10 per cent. Everybody else saw his political fortunes as being best crystallized in the context of an ethno-sectarian framework.

The memoirs of Tawfiq al-Suwaydi, I think, show in many ways the ebbs and flows of liberal thought and liberal order in Iraq. He, I think, understood it primarily in terms of an institutional framework. It was like an institutionalization of liberalism in parliamentary democracy, and elections and constitutions and parliaments, rather than what Tocqueville said: liberalism, like democracy, is a state of the heart. You have to be really immersed in that specific consciousness.

Fitting in liberalism in the broader context of the Arab world at present, I think maybe the term 'Arab liberalism' is an oxymoron, in the sense that liberals certainly did not rise to their proclaimed principles in the counter-revolutions that quickly followed the Arab Spring of 2011. Their positions in Tunisia, their positions in Egypt, I think make it clear that liberalism is not seen in terms of a matter of rights or a matter of minority privileges but rather, above all, a certain consciousness that rejects any alternative mechanism of constructing the Arab world except those that were framed in the nationalist/secularist discourse.

I'd like to compare these two figures, finally, of Iraqi liberalism. I don't include Kamel al-Chaderchi as a liberal figure because in the final analysis he was kind of favouring socialists. Social democracy has in it elements of liberal thought but the two great liberals of Iraq are on one side, Tawfiq al-Suwaydi – aristocratic background; political dynasty; modernist, pragmatic perspective on politics; in many ways a figure that bridged two worlds, the world of the late Ottomans and the world of the modern nation-state. He was in his life and in his politics supremely non-sectarian, which is a very liberal thing to say in the context of Iraq.

His mirror image, as it were, is Muhammad Fadhel al-Jamali, who came from a different kind of background, a religious Shi'a background. Educated in the best academies: the American University of Beirut and later at Columbia, where he was influenced by John Dewey and the entire liberal tradition associated with the eastern American establishment. He was personally liberal in his conduct. He married an American lady. He was also supremely non-sectarian.

So if you ask me, how can liberalism flourish in the context of any country in the Near East in the post-Ottoman years, one of the preconditions must be not a kind of lip service to non-sectarianism but actually living it and experiencing it, and refusing it and denouncing it. This, unfortunately, has not happened. So those who claim the liberal mantle have really betrayed the main principles of it. When I refer back to that generation, I refer back to a generation that was far more principled, far more flexible, far more accommodating and far more inclusive than what came after.

Jane Kinninmont

Thank you, Dr Ali. We will have an opportunity for questions and answers with all the speakers after all the panellists have spoken. Our next speaker is Tarek Osman, a political economist specializing in the Arab world. His book, *Egypt on the Brink*, covers Egypt's intellectual history, different currents from Nasserism and nationalism to political Islam. It's a particularly interesting book for its description of how an emerging young middle class were creating pressures for change in Egypt. I say that's particularly interesting because the book was written and finished in 2010 and was somewhat prescient about what was to happen the following year.

We're very glad to welcome Tarek back to Chatham House. He's recently returned from Egypt, and I'm sure some of what Dr Ali was saying will also resonate with you.

Tarek Osman

Thank you for saying prescient. I would say lucky as opposed to prescient with the book, but thank you. I have six or seven bullet points I will raise with you and hopefully they can trigger questions and discussion later on. All of them are focused on Egypt.

I'll start with the first one about Egyptian liberalism. Most people usually define that as the political liberalism of Egypt, roughly from the first constitution in the country in 1923 up to 1942 roughly, 1943, the period right before the Second World War, when many – not all – Egyptian observers would say that Al Wafd, the defining party in that period that had huge popular support, many would say started to degenerate and more or less lose the popular support in an attempt to have buy-in from the palace and from the British occupying power at the time.

But the first point I'm trying to put forward to you is that I think, in my opinion, the more appropriate definition of liberalism in Egypt is the 40 years before that, which is basically, for those of you who are familiar with Egypt – and I'm sure most people are – it's the period of Khedive Ismail. That's the period where Egypt effectively opened up to the world. The idea itself of the country not being Ottoman, not necessarily being Islamic, started more or less to gain wide support within Egypt, or at least recognition that there is another idea, another notion of how we can look at our country. If you look at the historical period that lasted roughly from 1870s until the 1940s, then you can argue that there is a relatively longer period of some sort of liberalism in Egypt, as opposed to 20 years only of parliamentary democracy.

The reason I'm raising that is to argue that there is, in my opinion at least, some sort of heritage of liberalism in Egypt. Again, I know that will be debated by many people, but that's the first point I wanted to put forward.

The second point I wanted to put forward is that in the 20 years of this parliamentary democracy in Egypt, many people say: hold on, it wasn't really that much of a parliamentary democracy. It's very similar to South Africa in the past 20 years, where you have one party effectively dominating the politics. Everybody knew that whenever there was parliamentary elections in Egypt, it will be the Wafd that will win. All the other parties at the time were either tiny, small parties representing regional dimensions or palace parties or British parties.

But I think the important point that that period presented to Egyptians, which was not the case before or after, is that you can have what I refer to as disposable politicians. You can actually have a politician who will have a career and he will lose elections or lose support within his party – it was always 'his', unfortunately, there wasn't a 'her' at the time – he would lose support within his party or in the election and therefore we would see him gone. There were many examples of those in that period. I think that's an important value in that experiment in the politics.

The third point I want to raise is that in the whole period from the 1870s until roughly the 1940s, it wasn't just politics – even the economics, in my opinion, were relatively conducive to the rise of some sort of liberalism. The reason I say that is that the Egyptian economy before that, arguably since the pharaohs until that time, has always been concentrated in land ownership: so that the wider the land ownership, the richer you are, the closer you are to decision-making, the more powerful and influential you are. From roughly the 1880s, I would argue (without going into details) that there were so many changes in the Egyptian economy that meant that there was the beginnings of industry, the beginnings of a services

economy, the beginnings of banking – which by the 1920s, by the 1930s, led to the emergence of new financial powers who by default (always, I think, all over the world) start to become closer to the power authorities, challenge them slightly and build some sort of parallel establishment, or a rising establishment to the old, major landowners. The characteristics of those new economic powers – many would argue most of them were not Egyptians, they were predominantly Western or Armenian or Jewish or Levantine. Very true, and I'll come to that point, but I think there was also a huge Egyptian component inside that.

So the third point I want to put in front of you is that the economics of Egypt in that longer period were conducive to liberalism. As Jane mentioned, I personally pay a lot of attention to the role and the size and the power of the middle class in Egypt and in other parts of the Arab world. I try, at least. I think it was that period that started to see the emergence of an Egyptian middle class. Most Nasserites in Egypt – the huge fans and followers, if you like, of the form of Nasserite Arab nationalism – argued strongly that it was the achievement of Gamal Abdel Nasser to open the Egyptian economy for the rise of a middle class. He certainly opened the window significantly, yes, but I think the window opened prior to Gamal Abdel Nasser because of that economic development in Egypt. In my opinion, the rise of a middle class, or the beginning of a rise of the middle class, is conducive to liberalism.

The fourth point is education. That period, and arguably before the 1920s (I would argue, again, without getting into details; if you want, later on we can discuss that) – in the period from the 1890s to the 1910s, 1920s, it was the period when Egyptian education (or education in Egypt) really had quite an antagonistic view towards Al-Azhar, toward the major Sunni Islamic establishment in Egypt which dominated massively education in the country. It was in the 30 years prior to 1920s where that was challenged massively. Yes, the participation in that secular education increased dramatically later on, but the fact that Al-Azhar had no longer a monopoly or the major influence on education – or the church, by the way – happened in that period, I would argue. Of course, if education moves a lot from religious to secular education, I think that is also conducive to the idea of a liberal narrative.

The final point on that part is, of course, education is culture and entertainment. This, in my opinion, is the golden period of Arabic literature, Arabic theatre, Arabic cinema, songs. I think that if you, in a very soft and very non-academic way, if you just watch the films of the period, listen to the lyrics of the songs, see the type of visual and audio images presented in Egypt and across the region at the time, there is certainly a subtle challenge to the idea that you are looking at very conservative, pious, Islamic or Christian societies. These are societies that seemed to be relatively comfortable with looking at the West and imitating the West in many ways, which I would say – many might challenge me on that point, but personally I would say it's very conducive to a liberal narrative in the country.

But the best, in my opinion, the best development that all of this led to in Egypt – I think this is a very Egyptian point. I'm not qualified to comment on the other parts of the Arab world on that point. But I think in Egypt it gave rise to something called Egyptianism, in my opinion. Before that, Egypt was very much, of course, an old country, and Egyptians are usually fond of saying Egypt is Um al-Dunya (Mother of the World), we're the oldest civilization, blah blah blah. But at the end of the day, I would argue that Egypt before that period was a very introverted country where everything is focused – certainly the politics of it – is focused on the River Nile, where agriculture was by far the major consumption mentally of 95 per cent at least of Egyptians. If you go to Egyptian villages and talk to the elderly, at the time the main social drive has always been the mosque in the village, has always been al-'omda - the chieftain, if you like - of the village, who always gets his legitimacy usually from land ownership and from being one of the leading families, but predominantly from getting the mosque to endow him with some sort of legitimacy.

The idea of Egypt being so introverted, to a large extent religious, again the massive power of the church and Al-Azhar, every single ruler without exception – funnily enough, including Napoleon – when they come to the country, they have to get some sort of religious legitimacy to rule the country. All of that gets challenged not in *Al-Ahram*, not in a newspaper, but in the people's minds – that you can be an Egyptian Christian and become a minister, you can become a prime minister, you can be a Jewish Egyptian and become a super-rich person, and you can be an atheist Egyptian and just put forward that idea and you're still Egyptian. You have people like Taha Hussein, who is a leading literary figure in Egypt and across the Arab world, who says: is Egypt really Arab? Our future is with the Mediterranean and looking forward.

I know many people say: completely ridiculous, of course the history of the country dictates Arabism, dictates whatever. Yes, but there was the beginning of an idea of something different that came out and, I think, amazingly challenged the identity of the country. Many Egyptians far from the top 3 or 5 per cent, below that, believed in that and more or less started to get into the notion of, yes, Egypt can be many things. Many Levantines in the country, Jewish, Armenians, there was a cosmopolitan dimension.

This is amazing. What is horrible is that all of that clearly did not seep through enough, because when the tide turned – and we can discuss why it turned – clearly this whole heritage was diluted very quickly. So it did not seep down enough into the lower middle classes and the poor. I think that's a very important point. The point number two, I think the liberal narrative in Egypt, and arguably across the Arab world, has always been very condescending to some extent to the people below it, and I think that's also a very important point to keep in mind.

Finally, it was not inclusive. I think that point we see today very much. Still it's very much lingering that if you're not part of that narrative, the leading voices then and now within that idea of Egyptian liberalism have never been inclusive, have never tried to reach out to those outside it.

Jane Kinninmont

Thank you. Our next speaker is Professor Charles Tripp, professor of politics with reference to the Middle East at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, where he is also one of the co-founders of the Centre for Comparative Political Thought. He is the author of various books, most recently one on cultures of resistance in the Middle East. He is also an expert on Iraq – I think he's going to return us to Iraq.

Charles Tripp

Thank you very much. I was asked by Chatham House to speak on traditions of liberalism in Iraq, and they said: you've got five minutes. So it's suggested that it's been pre-empted in some ways – these were not long traditions that needed or required a great elaboration. Which is a bit unfair but on the other hand, rather tiresomely for the audience, I think I shall probably agree with much that Ali has said.

I think one of the things when one looks at liberalism in Iraq, or traditions of liberalism in Iraq – I start to think, what is a tradition of liberalism in Iraq? There were two very ambivalent legacies, it seems to me, for historical memory in Iraq. One which was set up by the repertoire of practice, exactly what Ali talked about, which is in a sense: how did people practice, if they did, in the politics of Iraq as it was in the 20th

century, liberalism or a liberal ideal? The second, however, which is the one that gives you a bit more hope in some respects, is thinking of liberalism as a reservoir of ideas and trying to see how that was reproduced at different stages, by different means, in Iraqi history.

To take those two aspects, therefore, the repertoire of practices – one of the problems for poor Iraq is that in the last hundred years it's been the victim twice over of liberal imperialism. This doesn't give liberalism a good name, as you can imagine, nor does it necessarily mean that the kind of liberalism to which Iraqis were perforce introduced was particularly liberal in any serious sense. If you just take the British intervention at the beginning of the 20th century, there were a number of features of that which were quite interesting and I think also echoes some of what Tarek said as well about Egypt. This notion that everything that went before the British was illiberal, therefore what the British were setting up was to root out Oriental despotism, Ottoman despotism. So everything associated with the pre-First World War Iraqi society was categorized as that, which was total nonsense. It didn't take seriously Iraqis' experience of education, their experience of electoral politics, their experience of intellectual debate and engagement. It was just a tabula rasa to make the British liberal experiment seem that much more convincing.

But of course, the British then went on to create a liberal façade and a constitution and a so-called constitutional monarchy and a parliament that actually disguised deeply illiberal practices. The Iraqis had a rather wonderful expression for this for much of this part of the 1920s, which was what they called rather delicately 'the awkward situation'. In other words, basically it meant that while the British pretended to give power to the monarchy, parliament and so on, it was the British who remained in power. So you have here a liberalism or a liberal façade, but behind it stands Whitehall. Behind it stands a British imperial power.

It's not just a British imperial power standing behind it, it's what actual practices it developed within itself. You have an obsession with order and a notion that the army is the only way of imposing that order. The army becomes the first institution of the Iraqi state, antedating the monarchy, antedating the parliament. It was the means by which the Iraqi state was to be created. Therefore you can really get a sense that this is not going to be promising terrain for liberalism.

It was a deeply centralizing state. In that they shared much with the Ottoman elites as well, a notion of centralization: bring the provinces to heel, suppress provincial rebellions, create an efficient administration – not necessarily one that depended upon the consent of the governed. So again, a notion of strong centralization. And of course, it was a political economy based upon rent: first land, and then oil. In those conditions as well, as Tarek mentioned in relation to Egypt, it's necessarily very conducive to the creation of liberal access.

So there were two effects of this in practice which I think have had a baneful effect on Iraq under the monarchy but afterwards I think as well. The first is, of course, with these powerful institutions, with these powers that are shaping the political field of Iraq – oil rents, land rents, army, security state, centralization, hollow public institutions – where does it leave those who want to try and create a liberal space? Where does it leave those who genuinely believe that the Iraqi people should be consulted in some form or another, that they should be allowed to express difference, that they should be allowed to express opposition and so on?

Well, it left two options. One was suppression. You got suppressed because you voiced your opposition too much, so you went into exile, you were put in prison. You sometimes paid with your life if you were expressing the wrong kind of opinion. Or you tried to work out some kind of compromise. Ali, I think, has very fairly mentioned that this was the problem: the compromises. I agree with him very much about

Ahali and others, that they weren't necessarily liberal in the conventional way but in a sense they represented a potential of a liberal civil ideal. The problem is that they signed a pact with the devil. For the Ahali Group it was with Bakr Sidqi, which is not a good person to sign a pact with if you want a liberal experiment. With Tawfiq al-Suwaydi and Fadhel al-Jamali, again, having to operate under the conditions of the time, the person effectively they had to sign the pact with was Nuri as-Said, not known for his liberal ideals. When he pulled the plug on them, their governments collapsed. So there was a real problem for, as it were, the teeth of liberalism in that time. When you get to the NDP, they signed a pact with Abd al-Karim Qasim. Again, they found very quickly that that unravelled on them.

So this real dilemma for very sincere – I agree very much that many of these people were visionary, had ideas for Iraq, had ideas about liberalism, but how did they attach themselves to power that wasn't going to then devour them? None of them succeeded. So in that sense, it had a problem.

But the second problem, the second effect of this notion of liberal imperialism, was that it often discredited liberal ideals themselves. In other words, it didn't seem that liberalism was tied to any universals. It seemed to be tied to a cynical set of political strategies which were often deeply hypocritical. So again, what did liberalism actually mean? If somebody said 'democracy', if somebody said 'freedom', if somebody said 'rights', what did that actually mean to people when they saw the practices of those who governed them for decades?

However – this is to end on a not totally grim note, although I think Ali's description of what's been happening subsequently is quite depressing too. But there's a sense in which – I've talked about the repertoire of actions. This is the real dilemma: there is no repertoire of liberal politics in Iraq, if you look at that side of the tradition.

However, there is a reservoir of liberal ideas. If you look to this extraordinary explosion between 1945 and 1968 of poets, of creative writers, of artists, of sculptors, that's where you see something being expressed which is indeed not classical 19th-century liberalism, not the liberalism of the British, but a strong sense of – you see this very strongly in a lot of the poetry, even if people are Arab nationalists or Iraqi nationalists – a notion that political loyalty and political rights should not be tied to ethnicity. In other words, the notion that you exclude someone simply because they are the wrong kind of Iraqi should not be there. So in a sense therefore, that becomes very much part of it.

There's also a strong feature you notice in some of the poets, although some of them were condemned for this: the notion that there's no necessary link between the individual and the nation. The nation does not have a prior claim on you as an individual. You have a duty to make the nation work for you. So in a sense therefore, it was reversing exactly the relationship that had unfortunately been imposed on Iraqis for a long time during the nation-building period.

So in that sense therefore, when you look at that extraordinary free-verse movement in Iraq in the 1940s and 1950s, when you look at people who are questioning not simply tradition but how traditions have been constructed to serve power, what they're questioning is claims of authenticity and claims of exclusivity. In that sense, I would argue that they are the true repositories of a really liberal notion of plurality, cosmopolitanism and an Iraq that needn't be that of the disciplined state.

Jane Kinninmont

Thank you, Charles. Finally we have Nadim Shehadi, associate fellow on the Middle East and North Africa Programme here at Chatham House, and an academic visitor at St Antony's College, Oxford. Nadim is an expert on everything in the Middle East but particularly the Middle East peace process, refugees, Lebanon and Syria.

Nadim Shehadi

Thank you, Jane. It's so difficult to follow three illustrious speakers. I won't speak on a specific country, I'll speak more about the ideas. In a way, any resemblance with reality is purely coincidental in what I say.

I've lived in places where Arab liberals lived too. Arab liberals, as Charles said, tend to go into exile in the 20th century. They go to Ras Beirut, where I was brought up. They go to Switzerland, where I spent a year and I met many Iraqi exiles in my youth. I used to walk along the Lac Léman with Iraqi exiles. I heard horrible stories about 1958, since I was very young in Iraq. And London – London is also the place where all the Arab exiles came. We used to call Wimbledon and Putney the London No-Fly Zone in the 1980s.

I want to just say that there is no real definition of what liberalism is. In a way, liberalism is something you recognize when you see it but you can't really define. There's a lot of misunderstanding or confusion between liberalism and secularism, liberalism and nationalism and non-sectarianism. So I don't see that a liberal party should rule to have liberalism. You should have a liberal atmosphere. It's a sort of prevailing atmosphere where you can have Islamist liberals, you can have secularist liberals, you can have tribes and pre-modern institutions.

Liberalism is often confused with modernity and modernism and in a way suppresses all these pre-modern ideas. What we've seen in the 20th century was the suppression of a lot of pre-modern ideas. Tribes were suppressed, sects were suppressed, ethnicity was suppressed. So what we think are liberal values, which were associated with the strong state in the 20th century, were very oppressive in a sense. What we saw after the Arab Spring, with the emergence of people from that nightmare called the 20th century, is that they emerged in their original forms. I don't think that's illiberal in that sense.

So I think that when a historian in the future looks back at the 20th century, it will look very illiberal as a century – and not just in the Middle East. I think it's a global phenomenon in the development of ideas which were influenced a lot by the 1870s in Europe. Bismarck is probably the greatest influence on the 20th century. There was a reaction to liberalism and the creation of the strong state, the homogeneous state, the welfare state even, was not a very liberal phenomenon.

You can see this conversation happening between Europe and the Middle East about the Arab Spring because there is a so-called modernist ideal which is confused with liberalism, by which the Arab Spring is being judged. So the emerging forces in the Arab Spring who want freedom and who are maybe not liberal themselves but what they want is very liberal, and they revolting against a very illiberal order that crushed the whole region, they are judged very harshly because they are pre-modern, because they are tribes, because they are sects, because of their ethnicities. So modernism and modernity, the way it evolved in the 20th century, has confused people with liberalism. I think that's one of the problems.

I'll end with another distinction, which is the distinction between secularism and cosmopolitanism. Egypt in the time of Khedive Ismail was cosmopolitan, it was not liberal. So there's a difference between cosmopolitanism and secularism in that sense. Sami Zubaida makes the distinction in that it's the

difference between protecting boundaries and making people secure within their boundaries enough to interact in a sort of civil manner – when these boundaries are threatened, then they become sectarian and violent – whereas 20th-century secularism in the Middle East especially, as represented by the ideas of Kemalism, of the Ba'ath Party, of Nasserism, of Bourguiba and all that, was to break down all the boundaries and create a very strong state that will maintain the order. That ended up becoming the tyrannical state that is now collapsing, in a sense.

So I think the Arab Spring is a re-emergence of a liberal atmosphere and a liberal order, even though it looks ugly now.

Jane Kinninmont

Thank you, Nadim. We now have 10 to 15 minutes for questions and answers with the speakers.