

Arab Insight

Bringing Middle Eastern Perspectives to Washington

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EMERGING SOCIAL & RELIGIOUS TRENDS

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MOHAMMED ABU RUMMAN

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**Bringing Middle Eastern Perspectives
to Washington**

Arab Insight, an innovative journal that features authoritative analyses from Middle Eastern experts on critical regional issues, seeks to improve the relationship between the United States and the Arab world by cultivating a better understanding of the complex issues facing the Middle East among Western policy-makers and the public at large.

Articles in *Arab Insight* do not represent any consensus of opinion. While readers may agree or disagree with the ideas set out in these articles, it is our purpose to present a diversity of views rather than identifying with a particular body of beliefs.

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Editor's Note

WE LIVE IN A FAST-PACED global era in which the interconnectedness and smallness of the world have become increasingly apparent. While information is at the tip of our fingers, social and cultural misunderstanding still abounds. This issue of *Arab Insight* offers in-depth analysis of a number of trends emerging in the Arab world today, from the widening use of the Internet and new technology in religious expression and Islamist activity, to women's reform movements in the Gulf and arms proliferation among Yemeni tribes and citizens. Through the careful examination of various trends, we hope to shed light on the transformations taking place across the Arab world. While the essays in this issue speak to regional and even global trends, they also address the diversity and the heterogeneity of the Arab world, its disparate political, social and economic climates, and the different ways in which change emerges and reform occurs.

With the steady advances in technology and the rapid growth in Arabic-language satellite channels, religious bodies in the Arab world have begun to vocalize their points of view through mediums never before used. Rather than turning to their local mosques for prayer and religious guidance, Muslims all over the world can now turn to popular online mosques and religious websites. In this issue's essay entitled, "The Internet is the New Mosque: Fatwa at the Click of a Mouse," journalist Abdallah el-Tahawy explores this phenomenon, shedding light on how Muslims can go online and instantly obtain *fatwas* (religious edicts), rather than waiting for a pronouncement

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from their local sheikh. He also explores the recent phenomenon of Islamists waging war on the West through hacker attacks, or what is known as “electronic jihad.”

As with the use of the Internet generally, Islamists, especially young members of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood have begun to use blogs to voice dissent within their own organizations. Author Khalil al-Anani delves into the topic in this issue of *Arab Insight*, exploring the youth generation of the Muslim Brotherhood, who not only contest Western ideology through their posts, but challenge their Brotherhood elders as well. Furthermore, this issue includes an open letter from Saudi blogger, Mosfer bin Saleh al-Wadee, on Arab perceptions of the United States and the free medium that blogging provides for cross-cultural understanding.

Like Christian televangelists in the West, certain Muslim preachers, known as “new preachers,” have begun to utilize satellite technology and the information revolution to their advantage, appearing in their own television shows where they preach the ways of Allah. Often receiving large payments for their work, the issue of the “new preachers” is heavily debated and contentious, and one that Egyptian journalist Al-Sayed Zaied brings to life in this issue of *Arab Insight*.

Even with these new trends in the Arab world, revolving around the innovative use of technology, it is imperative to understand how in many parts of the region, political and cultural stagnation pervades, namely regarding women’s rights and liberal reform. This issue of *Arab Insight* offers the voices of women from two Gulf countries, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, who speak of the reforms that have taken place, but also the hurdles they continue to face. Haila al-Mekaimi discusses the failure of female candidates in Kuwait’s 2006 parliamentary elections, while Asmaa al-Mohamed discusses the legal barriers to women’s rights in Saudi Arabia with a focus on financial and political freedoms.

Widening the reform lens, this issue presents a section on the failures of liberalism and neo-liberalism to coalesce into effective reform movements throughout the Arab world. Going back to the Arab Renaissance and early interactions between Arab thinkers and Western liberal intellectuals, Moroccan writer Tayeb Bouazza, analyzes the factors that prevented liberalism from taking root and that currently impede neo-liberalism in the region. Bringing to life and focusing on Bouazza’s argument, Mohammed Abu Rumman details the failures of liberal reform in his home country, Jordan.

Finally, this issue of *Arab Insight* includes a section on social and cultural expression, including essays on the seemingly disparate topics of arms proliferation in Yemen, Arab political cartoons, and Syria’s lack of freedoms, especially relating to speech and the press. Yemeni Ahmed Zein’s “Armed and Dangerous” debunks common myths about Yemen’s highly armed society while analyzing the cultural roots of arms proliferation

and arms control efforts by the government and international community. In “Arab Funnies Get Serious,” Palestinian scholar Bissan Edwan unveils mainstream Arab perceptions of U.S. foreign policy through an examination of Arab caricature and cartoons, while in “Syria’s Crisis of Expression,” Akram al-Bunni delivers a scathing assessment of Syria’s lack of social and political freedoms through his examination of various legislation.

It is our hope that the examination of current Arab cultural and political trends will inform U.S. policy debates and increase awareness of the oftentimes paradoxical nature of Arab society, with its ability to harness and adapt to new technology, while concurrently failing to implement progressive liberal reform across the region. ■



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The Internet is the New Mosque Fatwa at the Click of a Mouse

ABDALLAH EL-TAHAWY

Journalist at Islam Online; Egypt

FOR FOURTEEN CENTURIES, Islamic practice has centered on the mosque. With Islam's combined emphasis on orthodoxy and orthopraxy, there was no substitute for the formal collective prayer that the mosque provides, nor for the religious instruction and interpretation that the mosque's imam or sheikh offers. However, this stable model has been completely transformed in the past decade, as Muslims have found, for the first time, an alternative to the mosque. Specifically, the Internet has become not only a clearinghouse for Koranic text, but also for religious guidance and even *fatwas* (religious edicts). This new, global online Islam has been propagated by countless websites maintained by sheikhs, religious scholars and even laymen. Today, any person can look up a *fatwa* on any subject, checking whether a particular action is *haram* (forbidden) or *halal* (permissible), sometimes within minutes, with just a few clicks of the mouse. Needless to say, this accessibility has been a boon to Islamic practice.

But just as conventional Islam benefits from use of the Internet, Islamist activists are also taking advantage of this free information environment, racing to digitize their radical brand of Islam. Their doctrine is a new concept of jihad, labeled "the jihad of the age" by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Islamic preacher and former dean of the College of Sharia and Islamic Studies at the University of Qatar, where he founded the Islam Online network.¹ No longer are Muslims exposed to a single Islamic discourse associated with their particular mosques, but rather many simultaneous online discourses.

1 http://www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/index.asp?cu_no=2&temp_type=44.

Online Islam and Online Salafism

In part because the Internet is the product of Western innovation and technological progress, the most regressive strains of Islamic society, Salafists in particular, see the Internet as one of the signs of the Resurrection Day, meaning the apocalyptic end times in Islamic tradition. To these religious conservatives, the Internet is a space for the spread of fornication, usury and lies, all of which are considered the lesser and greater signs of Resurrection Day. Ironically, the regressive Islamists who share this view nonetheless use the Internet as a vehicle for their radical message. Sheikh Mohammed al-Monjed, one of the first Islamists to establish a website with his Islam: Question and Answer site, uses his online influence to advance the thesis that the Internet is a sign of the Day of Resurrection.²

According to their proprietors, Islamic websites are the latest battlefield in the timeless struggle between right and wrong, between believers and unbelievers, and Islamists don't see their use of the Internet as hypocritical. Salafist Sheikh Dr. Saleh al-Sadlan, for example, maintains that the Internet is actually a conspiracy "put in place to wipe out Islamic identity." But, he adds, "praise God, Lord of the Worlds, many learned students have been able to turn this weapon against the enemies of God."³ In other words, according to Sheikh Hisham al-Aaref, who operates the Al-Aqsa Al-Salafi site, a new type of Salafism is evolving, "net Salafism," which uses the Internet in place of traditional sheikhs for the transmission of religious knowledge.⁴ In light of Salafism's condemnation of innovation (*bida'a*) and emphasis on a pre-modern lifestyle, one might consider "net Salafism" a contradiction of terms. But Salafist use of the Internet, like Salafist use of modern arms and ordnance, is justified as a necessary evil in the fight against infidels. To understand Salafist use of the Internet, however, one must appreciate how different it is from Western, or even progressive Islamic use. Whereas Westerners consider the Internet an open medium, in which information is readily accessible and any fact can be quickly and easily challenged, Salafists have networked their sites in a massive, yet confined web-ring. A young Muslim reading Salafist theory is unlikely to come across a dissenting opinion; rather, he will follow links from one Salafist page to the next, each one reinforcing the ideas of the others. For Salafists, then, the Internet is a confined echo chamber for radicalism, rather than an inclusive sounding board for ideas.

2 <http://www.islam-qa.com/index.php?ln=ara>.

3 <http://www.alsadlan.org>.

4 <http://www.aqsasalafi.com/aqsasalafimain/index.php>.

Regressive manipulation of the Internet is not the only problem with online Islam. Other critics argue that it consolidates the material dimension of Islam, while neglecting its spiritual nature. Moreover, some argue, the violations of privacy and self-sovereignty encouraged by the Internet could be detrimental to Islamic society.

Among supporters of Islamic use of the Internet, there is debate about how best to incorporate the Web into traditional Islamic activity. Some Islamic scholars, such as Dr. Qaradawi, argue that exploiting the Internet in the service of Islam is necessary and a religious obligation (*fard*). Others, like Sheikh Faisal Mawlawi, the secretary-general of the Islamic Group in Lebanon, go further to say that it is permissible to use religious funds to finance online religious activity. Sheikh Sadlan also approves of financing online activity, classifying it as a type of “jihad using money.” Even more forcefully supporting Internet in the service of Islam, during the launch of the Ikhwan Online website (the homepage of the Muslim Brotherhood movement), the former General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood Mamoun al-Hudeibi classified online activism as one way to fulfill one’s obligation to give time to Islamic causes. “It is a vital channel of communication between preachers and the world,” added the Saudi Sheikh Safar al-Ahawali, who runs the site Ahawali. Saudi Sheikh Salman al-Ouda has also argued that the Internet is “ideal [for] spreading Islam in the West.”⁵

There have also been attempts to militarize the Internet; as Faisal Malawi has said, “Internet activity in the service of Islam is jihad, particularly if Internet activists target pro-Israeli websites, or with the condition that the interests of Muslims are not hurt.” As the Salafist Sheikh al-Munjed added, “If we are unable to invade the unbelievers with weapons, then it is no less that we invade them using [the Internet].”

All the while, however, within this dynamic, and oftentimes radical online environment, some grapple with the ramifications of the Internet in a more staid manner. Hisham Jaafar, the editor-in-chief of website Islam Online, has said, “We are looking at the Internet as a space, a channel and an opportunity, and one of our starting points is consolidating the relationship between the Internet and the real world, dealing carefully with the imagined Internet identities, and demonstrating what in the Internet is *halal* and what is *haram*.”⁶

**“Praise God, Lord of the Worlds,
many learned students have been
able to turn this [the Internet]
weapon against the enemies of God.”**

5 <http://www.islamtoday.net>.

6 <http://www.islamonline.net/arabic/index.shtml>.

Differences of opinion over what role the Internet should play in Islam are borne out in the diverse perspectives offered by Islamic sites, which by some estimates now number 13,000. Some religious authorities have developed personal websites, as well as sites shared by multiple religious authorities, which offer more than one perspective or interpretation of religious issues. As Jaafar notes:

Islam gushed forth with all its diversity and branches into the virtual world, reflecting an infinite pluralism. At the sectarian level: Sunni and Shi'a. At the level of the Sunni schools of thought: Hanafi and Shafi'i. At the party level: Muslim Brotherhood and jihadist.⁷

Among the prominent, non-Salafist Sunni Islamic websites are Islam Online (www.islamonline.net), Islam Today (www.islamtoday.net), and a website with Yusuf Qaradawi's *fatwas*, lectures and speeches (www.qaradawi.net). The Salafist websites are led by Sheikh Abu Ishaq al-Heweny's personal site (www.al-heweny.com). Shi'ite religious authorities also have websites, including that of Sheikh Mohammad Ali Taskhiri, the secretary-general of the World Forum of Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought. In addition, there are government websites hosted by state-run religious organizations, the sites of movements and parties like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir, and sites created by other organizations and by individuals.

Islam Takes Hold of the Web

Online Islamic activities typically conform to one of five categories. The first is to conduct *da'wa* or missionary work; the second is to use vast Islamic networks that connect like-minded believers and serve as forums for Islamic activists. Related to this second category of activities is the third: online discussion in support of jihad. The fourth major category of Islamic activity is electronic jihad, which entails online attacks of Israeli sites, whether conducted by individuals or groups. The fifth form of online Islamic activity is the use and proliferation of online *fatwas*. A richer understanding of these five categories illuminates the future of Islamic practice.

Da'wa

The *da'wa* discourse focuses on spreading the cultural and religious output of Islam online, and can be summed up in the saying of the Prophet Mohammed: "Convey knowledge from me even if a single Koranic verse." Every Islamic website is essentially

⁷ Interview with Hisham Jaafar, editor-in-chief of Islam Online, Cairo, October 12, 2007.

a *da'wa* site, in name, slogan, and even in the pictures and design used. In other words, Islamic websites are all an electronic abridgment of the Islamic *da'wa*. The dilemma facing Muslims pursuing *da'wa*, however, is how best to convey the message of Islam. To whom is it directed? What is the content of the *da'wa* appeals?

Proponents of online *da'wa* see Islamic websites as obliged to act as virtual libraries, filled with as much information on Islam as possible. This sentiment has been particularly dominant on government organization websites, as evidenced by the Saudi Ministry of Religious Endowments' recommendation for "the establishment of a joint Islamic information site for various Islamic countries" before the 2001 conference of Ministers of Religious Endowments of Islamic Countries.

Islamic Online Networks

As online religiosity emerges, Islamic activists have been flocking to the Internet, and organizations deprived of physical space have been reinvigorated inside this virtual world. Hard-line organizations were the first to seize upon the Internet as a potentially valuable tool in its early years, with the Egyptian group Gama'a Islamiyya being the only Islamic organization in the early 1990s to maintain its own website. With the expansion of international informational jihadist activity, a number of online extremist *da'wa* forums emerged. Some examples include the World News Network, which posts messages from various jihadist groups, particularly al-Qaida and the Islamic State of Iraq; the Iraqi group Ansar as-Sunnah; the forum, The Space, which posts material from al-Qaida's media and propaganda wing as-Sahab; and the al-Nusra forum, which is run by the Global Islamic Media Front. There are also independent websites run by sheikhs or supporters of various Islamic organizations, such as Al-Maqrizi Center for Historical Studies website run by Dr. Hany al-Sibai, an Egyptian expatriate in England, and the Islamic Media Monitor website, managed by the Egyptian Yasir Seri. There are other websites backed by Salafi jihadists, such as the Pulpit of Monotheism and Jihad site, which is run by Abu Mohammed al-Maqqisi, a Palestinian-Jordanian. As-Sahab's webpage, Guide to Salafist Sites, provides more than 100 links to Salafist websites, mostly belonging to prominent sheikhs.

The majority of these websites and forums also perform the function of connecting Islamist websites and organizations, acting as a nervous system linking the far-flung organizations. Emulating the model of the decentralized al-Qaida organization, it has become easy to follow members of these groups by monitoring who logs on to certain websites. Many of these hard-line organizations undertake recruiting activity using these sites. Interestingly, the less open these religious websites are to alternative viewpoints, whether Sunni or Shiite, the more quickly they seem to spread.

Moderate Islamic websites have been relatively slow to emerge, with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (which, though considered radical by many Western analysts, is certainly moderate in the spectrum of influential Islamic organizations) only launching its websites in 2003. The Egyptian al-Wasat party also trailed in establishing an online presence. However, now that they are active, the Muslim Brotherhood sites have quickly become leading online Islamic destinations, and the Brotherhood is currently planning dozens of new sites. In addition, many prominent figures, including international affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood, now run sites such as the Ikhwan Network, which represents the traditional Brotherhood spirit, and region-specific websites such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and Syria.

Most Brotherhood sites identify themselves as aligned with the historical Muslim Brotherhood, and they strive to demonstrate the regional differences between themselves and other offshoots. Groups running the sites typically divide them into *da'wa*-related information and organizational functions.

The Struggle

Part of the *da'wa* service that Islamic websites offer involves supporting jihad by discussion among Internet users. In essence, the websites seek to give those who cannot directly undertake another form of jihad the opportunity to spend time and effort supporting Islamic and Arab countries under attack, as well as the opportunity to support social or *da'wa* causes in general. This discourse reflects an awareness among Islamic activists of the Internet's vital role in transforming passive viewers into active participants, even if only by participating in a discussion that socially normalizes, and therefore legitimizes other activities, including jihad.⁸ This online activity takes diverse forms, such as information campaigns like the Million Discs Drive, which seeks to widely distribute a 29-minute video called "The Tragedy of Palestine." Other forms of direct participation include campaigns to shape public opinion by pressuring the government or domestic institutions; examples include the "Release Assem El-Erian" campaign in Egypt organized by the Hamasna website, as well as the international campaign to protest the ban of the *hijab* in French public schools. Further subgroups of this movement have coalesced, with voluntary online organizations specializing in certain types of activism. These organizations include the Alternative Media and

8 The size and scope of this discourse on the Internet can be seen by searching on Google for the phrase "*nusrat al-rasool*" ("Victory of the Prophet," the name of a grassroots group which was formed to protest the Danish cartoons about the Prophet Mohammed); in Arabic, this search yields more than 1,000,000 results with websites, forums and online activism.

Video Activists, Resistance of the Pen and Camera, the Mobile Activist, Electronic Civil Disobedience, Keep the System Awake, and the Theater of War.

The Electronic Jihad

Inspired by traditional militant jihad waged by Islamists in countries scattered around the world, some activists have lately been developing a new form of attack known as “electronic jihad.” The electronic jihad focuses on cyber attacks and other online warfare tactics. In October 2000, for instance, a group of Israeli hackers launched attacks against the Hezbollah website after the group had taken three Israeli soldiers prisoner. The Israeli hackers removed the contents of Hezbollah’s page, and replaced it with the Israeli flag and Star of David. Arab hackers countered with cyber attacks on a number of Israeli government institutions, including the websites of the prime minister, the Knesset (the Israeli legislature), the Chamber of Commerce, the Israeli Stock Exchange, and the Bank of Israel. When the smoke had cleared, 40 Israeli websites and 15 Arab websites had been knocked down by hackers.

“When the smoke had cleared, 40 Israeli websites and 15 Arab websites had been knocked down by hackers.”

These tit-for-tat cyber battles between Arab and Israeli hackers continued for several months, with the Arab online offensive culminating on Dec. 29, 2001, when 80 Israeli websites were successfully attacked and taken out of service, including those of the prime minister and the Israeli army. Part of the economic impact of these cyber battles was a drop in investor confidence in the ability of Israeli companies to protect confidential information online.

It appears that the groups waging these attacks have developed some level of cohesion and have given themselves names appropriate for online jihad, in the fashion of Islamic organizations in the real world. Among the overt hacker groups there are the Pirate Boys, Ansar of the Electronic Jihad, the Knights of the Electronic Jihad, Collapse of the Dollar, the Electronic Jihad Group, and the Muslim Electronic Jihad Assembly. All of these groups possess their own websites, where they can organize volunteers to undertake coordinated cyber attacks and allow their members to exchange tips and information. The sites are organized to suit the nature of their missions. For instance, the Electronic Jihad Group’s website is divided into the following sections: an explanation of the nature of electronic jihad; an outline of electronic jihad strategy; the techniques used in waging cyber attacks; an explanation of the types of previous cyber attacks launched and the results achieved; and a call to all Muslim holy warriors (*mujahideen*) and hackers across the world to coordinate their attacks.

The Online Fatwa

Online *fatwas*, or religious decrees, have become both widespread and controversial in the past few years. When individual *fatwas* issued in response to specific circumstances are generalized and applied on a much broader level, their use is hotly contested. Acting as a website's voice, *fatwas* spread each site's individual ideology. According to Dr. Ragab Abu Mileeh, who is responsible for Islam Online's *fatwas*, the site focuses on general, non-sectarian *fatwas*, such as one banning Arab and Islamic countries from cooperating with the United States in the event of a war against Iran.⁹

Sometimes *fatwa* wars break out between Islamic websites issuing contradictory proclamations on certain issues. A number of Saudi Salafist religious scholars, for example, led by Abdullah bin Jibreen and Nasser al-Omar, issued a series of *fatwas* against Hezbollah during its war with Israel in the summer of 2006, labeling it as an un-Islamic party working for Iranian interests in the region. These *fatwas* prompted counter-*fatwas*, with Sheikh Salman al-Ouda of the website Islam Today denouncing the timing of the original *fatwas*. Al-Ouda was joined by Sheikh Mohsin al-Awaji, who called for "supporting Hezbollah's armed resistance in Lebanon" on his website.¹⁰ Meanwhile, al-Qaradawi's site said simply that "[t]he Lebanese Resistance is jihad," suggesting that it is legitimate. As these prominent sheikhs were delivering their proclamations, furious debates broke out among users on hundreds of online forums.

Dr. Abdel Fatah Edris, a professor of comparative jurisprudence, Dr. Mileeh, and Nasser al-Omar, director of the website The Muslim, all concur that online *fatwas* are the new, widely-available alternative for the Muslim masses. Regardless of one's stance toward online *fatwas*, the established fact is that they have become a means for Internet users to present their problems and receive detailed religious advice. Moreover, this impersonal means of communication allows users to ask more frank questions than social norms in their countries might permit. Within just a few minutes, Internet users are able to receive answers to their religious questions with little effort or cost, compared to trying to receive a *fatwa* by mail or over the phone. Users can also search online *fatwa* banks for a pertinent ruling, either by topic or the name of the issuing *mufti* (Islamic scholar capable of issuing *fatwas*). From the viewpoint of



A Kuwaiti newspaper reporting on a 2004 Saudi *fatwa* saying, "It is not permissible for a woman to go online except in the presence of a *mahram* [male guardian]."

9 Interview with Ragab Abu Mileeh, October 15, 2007.

10 <http://www.alwatanyh.com/forum/f2/t18948.html>.

the editors of Islamic websites, online search engines allow editors to easily call up all the *fatwas* previously issued on a certain topic, whether on their own website or other sites. Online *fatwas* have addressed new topics imposed by contemporary issues, such as religious questions regarding the Internet itself, which require the *muftis* to possess a general working knowledge of the Internet.

Conclusion

The Internet, ever spreading its global reach, has become a powerful tool for the distribution of information. Muslim society, like so many societies, has taken advantage of this tool, connecting like-minded individuals, increasing the availability of online *fatwas*, calling for more missionary work, and even waging electronic jihad in some instances. Islamists have shown themselves to be adaptable, and have harnessed and used new technologies to their advantage. In fact, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has been more successful in disseminating information, both in Arabic and in English, and furthering its cause than the Egyptian government has been with its official websites. With the open and robust religious discussion and activity taking place online, it is likely that these various discursive threads within online Islam will develop their own unique character, varying according to culture and geography, and will ultimately alter the character and form of Islam. ■

Da'wa for Dollars A New Wave of Muslim Televangelists

AL-SAYED ZAIED

Journalist; Egypt

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT Islamic phenomena to appear in Egypt over the past 10 years has been the so-called “new preachers,” the Muslim equivalent of American televangelists. The new preachers have shaken the Egyptian religious scene, not only taking advantage of mass media tools, but also doing so to convey a message that often sounds more like a secular self-help manual than religious instruction. As a result of the interaction between neo-liberalism and religious revivalism, a thriving industry has developed around these new preachers, and Islam in Egypt, like Christianity in the West, has become equal parts faith and commodity.

Growth of the New Preachers

The new preachers emerged in Egypt at a time when the violent, radical Islamist organizations of the mid-1990s were either fading away or changing course. The Muslim Brotherhood was embargoed in the political arena, and radical groups like al-Gamaa al-Islamiya were reworking their philosophies, renouncing violence as a means for political action and change. While Egypt stagnated politically and economic growth remained slow, neo-liberal reforms nonetheless created new business opportunities. In this milieu, the new preachers emerged as one of the most important socio-religious phenomena in Egyptian society.¹

¹ Wael Lutfi, *al-do'aat al-judad ... tahlil ijtima'i* [The New Preachers ... A Social Analysis] (Cairo: Al-Usra Bookstore, 2005).

The phenomenon began with a few isolated celebrities, and was led particularly by two young preachers, Amr Khaled and Khaled al-Gendy, who transformed the new religious cadre into a formidable social force. This evolution coincided with the decline of veteran Islamic preachers, such as Mohammed al-Ghazali, Sheikh Abdel Hameed Keshk, Sheikh Mohammed Motwale al-Shaarawe and others, leaving a vacuum to be filled by young stars.

The Medium is the Message

The new preachers' reliance on new media is the first thing setting them apart from the old guard. Many of the new preachers rose to prominence by using non-traditional outreach methods. Instead of conducting public religious instruction exclusively in mosques, they offered lessons in the elite upper-class clubs and in five-star hotels; one of the new preachers even gave lectures in Dreamland, a Disneyland-like Egyptian amusement park. These non-traditional gatherings were instrumental in introducing the preachers to the media, which in turn made them into superstars with popular programs and legions of fans. The media's fawning attention added to the preachers' perceived charisma, and later translated into huge profits.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of most new preachers is their use of new technology, which allows them to address a larger audience, and demonstrates their compatibility with the computer age. Some preachers use e-mail and chat rooms for online prayer and religious instruction, but other mass media tools are equally important. Amr Khaled, for example, in addition to giving lessons in person, uses a variety of media – including the Iqra'a, Orbit and Al-Rai satellite channels, his website, CDs, tapes and videos – to target middle- and upper-class audiences. These preachers' use of new tools and successful adoption of modern communication methods have revitalized religious practice.

From a Higher Calling to a Somewhat Lower One

Even more radical than the new preachers' use of new media is their focus on turning religious work into a profitable venture. Over time, their efforts have shifted from religious instruction and related television programs to product lines and profitable television appearances on networks owned by private investors, such as Dream and LBC, as well as the religion-oriented channels al-Resalah, al-Nas and al-Hekmah. Market activity is visible everywhere in the new preachers' peculiar trend, whether in their private bankrolling, or in the profitable Islamic cassette companies (some of which are partly owned by the preachers themselves, like Amr Khaled, whose collections were the top-selling item at the Cairo International Book Fair). Economic influences have

also shaped the new preachers' rhetoric, which praises wealth as a sign of God's blessing, and argues that building one's wealth can be a sign of getting closer to God. Some, like Khaled al-Gendy,² suggest that it is only right that religious figures amass wealth, so as to be on par with celebrities in other fields like soccer and entertainment.

The new preachers' focus is unsurprising: though their audience comes from a range of backgrounds, most are disproportionately well-educated, middle and upper-class young men and women, successful professionals working in fields like banking and telecommunications. In other words, the new preachers' audience

“Amr Khaled received the equivalent of \$9,000 a month for his program, a handsome sum in a country where the per capita annual income is only equivalent to \$1,350.”

is made up of the future economic and social elite in Egypt. Thus financial concerns are a salient theme for the preachers, patrons and audience in this unique industry.³

Many of the new preachers have practically become celebrities, with flashy cars and huge bank accounts. For the rest of Egypt, a tangible consequence of this material mindset has been the blatant commercialization of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting and piety. The holiday has become an annual income bonanza for these preachers, thanks to the fierce competition among the satellite channels that clamor for the new preachers to appear in their religious programming. Many of the new preachers have no qualms about asking for vast sums of money for appearing on these shows, even specifying the fee they expect in return. A source from the television station Iqra'a told the newspaper *El-Badeel* that Amr Khaled received the equivalent of \$9,000 a month for his program, a handsome sum in a country where the per capita annual income is only equivalent to \$1,350.⁴ After a dispute between Khaled and Iqra'a, which is owned by Saudi businessman Saleh Kamel, a number of channels vied for Khaled. Only by agreeing to more than double his pay did al-Rai TV win the contest, and Khaled launched his new program *Da'wa lil-ta'ayush* (“Invitation to Coexistence”) on the network in March 2007.

The competition for viewers has spurred Kamel's Iqra'a to bring in what are derisively referred to as “preacher clones” or “test-tube preachers” – preachers who have cultivated their images to attract Amr Khaled fans. Two examples include Mustafa Hosni (who considers Khaled his spiritual father, and had been an assistant on his

2 Conversation with the preacher Khaled al-Gendy on *Al-Arabiya's* website: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2006/05/21/23951.html>.

3 Wael Lutfi, *The New Preachers ... A Social Analysis*.

4 *El Badeel*, October 9, 2007.

“I have three cars. A Mercedes is not yet one of them, but I will have one by the end of the year, God willing.”

Iqra'a program), and Moez Masoud. Hosni is the host of *'Alaa Baab Al-Janna* (“At Paradise’s Gate”), while Masoud’s program is called *at-Tariq as-Sah* (“The Right Path”).⁵ Amr Khaled, however, remains the most striking of the new preachers. His recurring theme is “reconciling between religion and life,” and his

rhetoric, which stresses ambition, hard work and productivity, suggests Protestant, capitalist and neo-liberal influences. As an indicator of how the new preacher phenomenon is as much economic as it is religious, even the Lebanese Christian-owned television network LBC signed Khaled for an Islamic program during Ramadan one year, in an effort to expand its Gulf audience.⁶

The new preachers’ ascendancy was dramatic, and it quickly transformed them into savvy businessmen. In the course of a few years, Khaled al-Gendy went from being a petty merchant (the stated profession on his ID card) to a preacher earning 130 Egyptian pounds (LE) a month (\$22). In time, after combining his callings for business and religion, his monthly income increased to more than LE 300,000 (\$50,000). Al-Gendy founded a company called Islamic Hotline, which specializes in responding to call-in religious questions, in exchange for a fee, of course. One minute costs the caller LE 1.50 (\$0.25), with the average call lasting about five minutes. In what may prove an even savvier business move, al-Gendy founded a company named al-Gendy for Publishing and Import/Export. One has to wonder what the relationship is between *da'wa* (missionary work) and the import-export business. In an interview published on *al-Arabiya's* website, al-Gendy discussed his wealth frankly, saying:

I have three cars. A Mercedes is not yet one of them, but I will have one by the end of the year, God willing. The saying of the Prophet Muhammad goes: ‘God’s blessing has its enemies.’ It was said, ‘Who are they, messenger of God?’ He said: ‘Those who are envious of people for what God has given them of His blessings.’ There is another thing that we should be frank in discussing: Is wealth legitimate or illegitimate? Is wealth or the love of money legitimate or illegitimate? Have you forgotten that there was a prophet like Solomon, who said ‘My Lord, forgive me, and grant me a kingdom never attained by anyone else. You are the Grantor’? Were Abdul Rahman bin Ouf and Uthman bin Affan crossed off the list of the first ten people in heaven because they were rich?

5 Mohammed el-Baz, “Test-tube Preachers,” *Al-Fagr*, October 1, 2007.

6 Patrick Haenni and Husam Tammam, “Egypt’s Air-Conditioned Islam,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 2003.

Al-Gendy went on to say:

The important thing is not wealth in and of itself, but rather how this money or this wealth was obtained. If it was through legitimate means, then there's nothing wrong with that. If it was through swindling and deceiving, then it is undoubtedly unacceptable, according to divine laws, reason and morality.⁷

Khaled al-Gendy's view of money is radically different from that of preachers from the older generation. Sheikh Abdel Hameed Keshk, for example, who in his day was the most famous and influential preacher in Egypt, refused to accept money for his work and died in poverty in 1996. Among the new preachers, however, al-Gendy hardly stands out for his material concerns. The preachers Mohammed Hussein Yaqoub, Mohammed Hassan, Safwat Hegazi, Mahmoud al-Masri, Abu Ishaq al-Huwaini and others each make more than LE 100,000 (\$17,000) a month. Those who sign up with the religious al-Nas satellite channel make even more, since the channel spends heavily to secure the most famous and popular stars. The pricey advertising offered during these Islamic programs is for products ranging from Islamic clothing for women to natural aphrodisiacs like white honey.

Dr. Abdel Sabour Shaheen, a professor at Cairo University and an old-school preacher, is sharply critical of the new preachers' attitudes towards financial compensation:

“These preachers are not concerned with Islamic *da'wa* as much as they are with material and moral gains, whether in being grossly overpaid, or the fame and stardom.”

These preachers are not concerned with Islamic *da'wa* as much as they are with material and moral gains, whether in being grossly overpaid, or the fame and stardom. They are not preachers for the sake of God, but are parasites in the field of Islamic *da'wa*. They push and shove each other to be on these channels because it is profitable for them. Meanwhile, these channels try to lure them because they are a new means of luring audiences and more viewers ...

These preachers' first concern is raising money ... making a preacher a puppet doing whatever the program director wants, even if it is at the expense of religious prin-

7 Conversation with the preacher Khaled al-Gendy, op cit.

ciples. This is shown clearly in the way they address and present certain subjects, focusing on provocative aspects in order to attract advertisers and viewers ... specialists in the field of Islamic *da'wa* have withdrawn from the field, since the excesses therein could hurt their reputation and infringe upon religion's legitimacy.

Ahmed Abdoun, a broadcaster on *Ama Yatasa'loon* ("What They Ask About"), a program on the satellite channel Dream, has a different view on the subject. He argues that people who leave other lines of work to dedicate themselves to preaching have a right to be paid for their work, as they have no other source of income and need to pay the bills just like everyone else. He argues the following:

Meanwhile, we have to discuss the huge salaries in the millions which movie stars and singers make. They do their job and they are paid for it. The preachers are also doing a job and being paid for it, but things might be different for the preachers because it's a religious affair and related to the message of Islam whose burden some preachers are bearing.

Dr. Yaser Nour, director of the religious al-Nas channel, agrees with Abdoun:

In the beginning, these preachers would refuse pay, but with the passage of time, the growing number of offers, the growing number of religious channels (at last count, there were 24 Islamic religious channels in Arabic), and with more channels offering Islamic religious programs to attract viewers, all this meant that [the preachers] would not only be paid, but would each command their own price in the Islamic *da'wa* market.

Dr. Nour says he is against the soaring pay for preachers and the exorbitant prices they charge during and after Ramadan. He suggests that the preachers simply ask for what the channel can afford to pay. Expressing concern that the preachers of God would become traders of religion, Nour emphasized that Islam is not to blame for its own commoditization. Nour blames that on the satellite channels' fierce competition for the best-known preachers.

New Preachers, Good for Islam?

With the new preachers rising to fame by using Western neo-liberal methods while preaching sacred Islamic values, the controversy over the group is unsurprising. Modern global communication has lent itself well to these individuals, allowing them, in true capitalist fashion, to rise from merchants to superstars. Yet, ultimately, the

commercialization and mass dissemination of Islamic preaching can be construed as either positive or negative. Regardless of whether or not their rise to fame is a boon or a detriment to Islam and its practitioners in Egypt, the new preachers' popularity is a striking trend, and warrants continued examination. ■

Brotherhood Bloggers A New Generation Voices Dissent

KHALIL AL-ANANI

Editor of Al-Siyassa Al-Dawliya and Author of The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt ... Race Against Time (Cairo, 2007); Egypt

THE NUMBER OF ISLAMISTS BLOGGING in Egypt has increased noticeably of late, and this mass movement is especially apparent within Egypt's largest opposition party, the Muslim Brotherhood. Often constrained in their own organization, Brotherhood bloggers have begun to savor the freer outlet of the Internet. Though the Muslim Brotherhood may have initially approved of its younger members starting blogs, the bloggers have gone beyond their role as a media tool; now they are writing unprecedented, blunt public criticism of certain aspects of the Brotherhood. These are not ordinary bloggers idly chatting and surfing online, but rather rebels, freed from ideological and organizational constraints. They resent their political and social situation, and disagree with their organization's rhetoric and jurisprudential stances. These bloggers comprise a vanguard searching for new frameworks that will exploit its abilities and fulfill its ambitions, similar to the student movement that emerged throughout Europe in the late 1960s. Young Muslim Brothers did not have purpose or a means to express their aspirations and ideas until they found blogging, a medium that allows them to vent criticisms, and serves as an incubator for writers' ideas. In light of Islamist group tactics, which typically depend on an opaque structure and organizational secrecy, it is ironic that the future of the Muslim Brotherhood seems inexorably tied to a public information forum. Some of these bloggers have sacrificed their future within the movement to lay bare the group's organizational legacy, revealing many secrets about the hierarchy of Islamist organizations. Others have opted to criticize their organiza-

tions in the hopes of encouraging those wavering on controversial matters to speak up, while also wishing to draw attention to themselves and their generation, which eschews values of obedience and loyalty. How the Brotherhood leadership addresses this dissension within its ranks will have a profound impact on its evolution as a political organization.

Brotherhood Bloggers Breaking Taboos

The voices of Mohamed Hamza, Magdy Saad, Abdel-Moniem Mahmoud, Abdel-Rahman Ayyash, Somiya el-Erian, Ibrahim el-Houdaiby, Abdel-Rahman Rashwan and an unknown number of others previously went unheard before the advent of blogging. But almost overnight, these bloggers have risen from oblivion to become virtual stars, and shining examples of a new Brotherhood generation making its mark and using new tools to pursue its goals. These are not average bloggers, simply offering idle thoughts on personal matters or current affairs, nor are they just young men looking to idly pass their time online. Rather they are a phenomenon aiming to break taboos that have been in place for more than 80 years, and they are buttressed by the organizational values and discipline of the Muslim Brotherhood. The phenomenon of Brotherhood blogging has passed through three basic stages: exploration, civil resistance and self-criticism.

Stage 1: Exploration

The first phase of Brotherhood blogging can best be characterized as an experiment, seeking to challenge the leftist and nationalist domination of the Egyptian blogosphere. This experiment's goal was to import the experience of various secular ideologies into the Islamist camp and employ it to serve the Islamist movement, as one Brotherhood blogger put it.¹ There is, however, a key difference between the experiences of leftist and Islamist bloggers in their respective goals. Whereas leftist blogs, which have no true organizational structure, aim to criticize government oppression and human rights violations, the Muslim Brotherhood blogs primarily discuss their own organization – its political and intellectual rhetoric on the one hand and its organizational structure on the other.

This exploratory stage began with two well-known blogs, "I Am Brotherhood"² by Abdel-Moniem Mahmoud, a 27-year-old journalist with the *Al-Dustour* newspaper, and "Whatever, It Doesn't Matter"³ by Magdy Saad, a 29-year-old student leader working in the private sector. Both of these young men began blogging after an embitter-

1 Author telephone interview with Brotherhood blogger Abdel-Rahman Rashwan, October 17, 2007.

2 "I Am Brotherhood," <http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com>.

3 "Whatever, It Doesn't Matter," <http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com>.

ing experience: On March 3, 2006, they were arrested along with 19 Brotherhood leaders and members, including Dr. Rashad al-Bayoumi, a 72-year-old member of the Muslim Brotherhood's supreme guide office, Ayman Abdel-Ghani, Abdel-Mageed Mashali, Mohammed Abdel-Wahhab and Ahmad Abdel-Gawwad, in what was known in Egypt at the time as "the students' case." After Mahmoud and Saad were released, their Brotherhood blogs launched to help focus the media spotlight on the arrests. By the end of 2006, the Egyptian Islamist blogger movement was gaining steam as the number of bloggers quickly multiplied.

Stage 2: Civil Resistance

The civil resistance stage was launched after more than 40 Brotherhood leaders, including the Deputy Supreme Guide Mohammed Khirat el-Shater, were transferred to a military tribunal in February 2007. Brotherhood blogging during this stage became an online sensation, as more members and sympathizers logged on. The goal during this stage was to focus attention on the military tribunals and quickly report on their news, while also revealing their deficiencies before local and international audiences. This phase began with the blogs posted by family members and relatives of the detainees, the most famous being "Ensa" ("Forget"), which is structured as a news channel following the tribunal's sessions (25 posts as of Nov. 1, 2007), and which also hosts personal information on each of the detainees in Arabic and English.⁴ "Ensa" is actually an agglomeration of a number of family blogs devoted to the individual detainees. Some argue that these blogs were created by the detainees' children as a manifestation of their sentiment that the Muslim Brotherhood had no strategy to deal with the military tribunals, whether through media coverage, amassing support, or mobilizing public opinion at home and abroad. Among these frequented blogs are those by the children of Khirat el-Shater⁵ and the well-known Brotherhood businessman Hassan Malek,⁶ "El-Fagreya" founded by Asmaa Yasser Abdu for her father's cause, and "The el-Erian Daughters" blog, maintained by Asmaa and Somiya, the daughters of the frequently-arrested Brotherhood leader Assem el-Erian.⁷

Stage 3: Self-Criticism

Currently, Brotherhood blogging has outgrown its earlier two purposes and is delving into a self-criticism phase, in which aspects of the Muslim Brotherhood's organization

4 "Ensa," <http://ensaa.blogspot.com>.

5 "Khirat el-Shater," <http://www.khirat-elshater.com>.

6 "Free Hassan Malek," <http://freehassanmalek.blogspot.com>.

7 "The el-Erian Daughters," <http://banatelerian.blogspot.com>.

and ideology are questioned. This stage has clearly spread among the Brotherhood youth, and this may be the first time in the Brotherhood's history that it has faced such open criticism from its own members. The Brotherhood blogger Magdy Saad's "Whatever, It Doesn't Matter" blog, which has published a number of posts addressing the organizational and philosophical situation inside the group, is perhaps the best-known example of this trend. Saad's blog was followed by a series of others, such as "Waves in a Sea of Change"⁸ started by 27-year-old Mostafa el-Naggar. El-Naggar's website is dedicated to monitoring all the critiques of the Brotherhood posted elsewhere, often reposting them to help amplify their effects.

Some blogs have concentrated on the Brotherhood's political and intellectual rhetoric, including gentle criticism of the rhetoric's very basis. "One of the Brotherhood" went online in late 2006, and its 27-year-old writer Mohamed Hamza is one of the more influential bloggers seriously discussing ideological and intellectual issues. The same goes for "Brotherhood Youth," run by Abdel-Rahman Rashwan, a favorite of the other bloggers, due to its highly rationalized approach to deconstructing Brotherhood rhetoric.⁹

Models of Brotherhood Blogging

There is no single model for Brotherhood blogging, revealing that there is some degree of intellectual disagreement and generational diversity within the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, bloggers have a broad range of goals; for example, there are those who see blogging as a potent means to improve their position within the Brotherhood, or to draw the attention of Brotherhood leaders to their talents and the role they could play. Others see blogging as a vehicle for criticism of the leaders, especially some of the mid-level leaders who enjoy little popularity among the Brotherhood's youth. Still others view blogging as a way to stir up new ideas within the organization and refine its political and intellectual rhetoric. As a result of this range of goals, there are numerous types of Brotherhood blogs.

News Blogs

News blogs are concerned with monitoring all the news and commentary on the Brotherhood from other media sources. Most prominently, Abdel-Moniem Mahmoud's "I Am Brotherhood," which some refer to as "Abdel-Moniem Reuters," tirelessly gathers news items on the Brotherhood and adds its own commentary. Mahmoud's work for

8 "Waves in a Sea of Change," <http://2mwag.blogspot.com>.

9 "Brotherhood Youth," <http://ikhwanyouth.blogspot.com>.

the opposition newspaper *Al-Dustour* has helped him in this regard, and he has attracted attention within the Brotherhood for his extensive network of connections in the media and civil society. His blog also tracks the news of arrests of Muslim Brotherhood members, and publishes photographic evidence of human rights violations in Egypt.

Rebel Blogs

With perhaps the loudest voice among Brotherhood bloggers, the rebel bloggers aim to draw attention to weak points within their organization, including intellectual and organizational stagnation, and their implications for Islamist youth and the Brotherhood's support base. These blogs raise issues that had previously been taboo in Muslim Brotherhood discourse, such as the Brotherhood's internal organizational system. These blogs also critique the Brotherhood's political and intellectual discourse. This type of blogging has stirred trouble within the ranks of the Brotherhood, both provoking more conservative factions by openly discussing the organization's flaws, and generating reservations on the part of some Brotherhood leaders toward this new type of self-criticism, in the belief that it could adversely affect the group's external image and internal cohesion.

The best example of a rebel blog may be "Waves in a Sea of Change," which raised the ceiling for Brotherhood self-criticism to unprecedented heights. In its early posts, the blog addressed the procedures for promotion within the Brotherhood, bluntly criticizing the prioritizing of loyalty and obedience over competency. The blog offered an example: how the organization selected its candidates for the 2005 parliamentary elections. The blog argued that "sheikhs from the mosques were chosen and pushed to enter the elections and do political work without them having any prior experience in politics or work in general."¹⁰ The same blog also objected to the Brotherhood's continuous mix of preaching and politics, which denies it the ability to further develop its ideas and rhetoric. Later, "Waves in a Sea of Change" blasted the Brotherhood's mid-level leadership, or what it called the "administrator class," for monopolizing the group's organizational structure without a hint of transparency or openness to criticism and alternative viewpoints.¹¹ Meanwhile, "The Free," run by someone calling

"Others see blogging as a vehicle for criticism of the leaders, especially some of the mid-level leaders who enjoy little popularity among the Brotherhood's youth."

¹⁰ "Waves in a Sea of Change," <http://2mwag.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post.html>.

¹¹ "Waves in a Sea of Change," http://2mwag.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post_29.html.

himself Abu Yasser, demanded that the mid-level leaders distance themselves from, or apologize for their administrative mistakes.¹²

One of the most serious issues “Waves in a Sea of Change” has addressed is the Brotherhood’s internal selection process. The blog criticized the nomination and voting processes of the Brotherhood, the former giving priority based on the educational level attained by Brotherhood members, not their politics or electoral platform. In vot-

“The blog broadcasts videos with news briefs on the detainees, as well as details of human rights violations committed against them.”

ing, the blog argues, matters are even worse, with the right to vote restricted to members of a certain rank and above, preventing both associated and regular members – who make up the majority of the Brotherhood – from voting.

The other well-known blog practicing self-criticism is Magdy Saad’s “Whatever, It Doesn’t Matter,” which made a splash with-

in the Muslim Brotherhood and paved the way for young Brotherhood members to be more openly critical of the organization. For instance, the blog tried to establish the principle of self-criticism; one post, bearing the title “Teach Yourselves Rebellion, Alarm and Throwing Stones,” attempts to break the taboo against criticizing the Brotherhood. This use of the term “rebellion” was a defiant challenge from a young Brotherhood member directed at the leaders who maintained an old-school mentality.¹³ While this posting displeased many people across the ranks of the Brotherhood, it succeeded in breaking the silence and thus forcefully inaugurated the period of Brotherhood self-criticism. Saad himself says, “Self-criticism is a healthy phenomenon for the group, since it expresses a kind of natural intellectual back-and-forth within the Brotherhood ranks.”¹⁴ Saad emphasizes that criticism needs to be constructive and address serious issues, and he later posted a message aimed at guiding bloggers’ critiques of the Brotherhood, and practicing what he preaches in terms of self-criticism.¹⁵ Speaking about his blogging experience, Saad says that it “represents a good opportunity for the normal audience to get to know a Brotherhood member, and to see the difference between the individual and the organization. It also provides space for freedom of expression in a more open way without having to follow certain rules.”¹⁶

12 “The Free,” <http://al7our.maktoobblog.com>.

13 “Whatever, It Doesn’t Matter,” http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com/2007/04/blog-post_25.html.

14 Author telephone conversation with Magdi Saad, October 25, 2007.

15 “Whatever, It Doesn’t Matter,” http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post_18.html.

16 Saad telephone conversation, op cit.

Although he admits that there are downsides to the blogging phenomenon, he thinks they will disappear as the experiment matures and stabilizes.

“I Am With Them” by Mostafa el-Naggar is another important blog offering a critical vision of the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly regarding how differences within the Brotherhood are managed. The blog’s unflinching nature has worried many within the organization. In one of his postings, el-Naggar discussed the differences of opinion within the Brotherhood; he attacked the stagnation that dominates and asserted that openly discussing controversial topics is not shameful or a violation of privacy, but rather shows a genuine desire for reform.¹⁷

Abdel-Rahman Rashwan’s blog “Brotherhood Youth” largely focuses on critiquing the group’s political rhetoric. For example, the blog addressed the highly controversial recent draft platform released by the Muslim Brotherhood, critiquing aspects of it and calling it a miscalculated attempt to form a political party. He noted that this comes a full 11 years after the attempt by Abu el-Ela Madi, who split off from the Brotherhood in 1996 to form the Al-Wasat Party, which has not yet been granted party status by the government.¹⁸

In his blog “Al-Kawakibi,” which clearly has critical leanings, Islam Lutfi posted a message laying out objective critiques of the Brotherhood’s draft party platform, and raising serious questions about the organization’s intentions; Lufti took particular concern with the article calling for the formation of a Council of Islamic Scholars, which has been the part of the platform provoking most of the attacks by scholars and observers.¹⁹

Social-Humanitarian Blogs

Social-humanitarian blogging emerged after military tribunals were formed for several Brotherhood leaders, and the detainees’ relatives had no other way to reach out to the public. This type of blog allowed relatives to emphasize the human interest side of the Brotherhood’s political plight, highlighting the detainees’ social roles and status. The blog “Ensa” is a living example, publishing sketches of the detainees’ personal lives, while also detailing the tragic circumstances the detainees’ families now face. The blog broadcasts videos with news briefs on the detainees, as well as details of human rights violations committed against them, whether during the arrest, or in the prisons where they are being held.²⁰ The blogs by detainees’ adult children also fit into the social-

17 “I Am With Them,” http://anam3ahom.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post_24.html.

18 “Brotherhood Youth,” <http://ikhwanyouth.blogspot.com>.

19 “Al-Kawakibi,” http://kawakby.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post_23.html.

20 “Ensa,” <http://ensaa.blogspot.com>.

humanitarian model, such as “El-Fagreya,” posted by Asmaa Yasser, the daughter of Brotherhood leader Yasser Abdu, who was arrested by the government in December 2006, and then sent to the military tribunal. Posts on “El-Fagreya” tend to be emotional, moving pleas generating reader sympathy for her and her father’s plight.²¹

Blogging Sisters

In addition to the cadre of young male bloggers, young women associated with the Muslim Brotherhood have become part of the blogging movement. This is an unparalleled development for the organization, and Egyptian society at large, given the conservative characters of both. The Muslim sisters’ blogs, at first, were connected to personal issues stemming from the arrest of family members in the Brotherhood. For instance, there are about 10 blogs run by young women in or affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Perhaps the most visible example is “That’s How I Am” by 17-year-old Arwa el-Tawil, who had 50,000 visitors on her site in just six months. Another female blogger is the aforementioned Asmaa Yasser Abdu, whose “El-Fagreya” is popular with other young bloggers for its focus on humanitarian subjects, which evoke empathy from her readers. There are also the blogs by the children of the Brotherhood detainees, such as “Daughter of Islam”²² by Somiya el-Erian and “The el-Erian Daughters,” a blog by her sister Asmaa el-Erian²³ which focuses on those being held by the government. Zahra el-Shater, the daughter of Deputy Supreme Guide Khirat el-Shater, also runs a blog focusing on the military tribunal cases.²⁴

The Brotherhood’s Reaction to the Bloggers

In general, the Muslim Brotherhood has not yet articulated a specific strategy for how to deal with the bloggers, and so far the group’s relationship with bloggers has passed through two stages. The first stage was one of indifference, in which the bloggers’ comments and unprecedented criticisms were ignored or dismissed as unimportant, as leaders believed that only a handful of youth in Cairo and Alexandria were involved. In this stage, some of the leaders were quite ignorant of both the nature of the blogs, and of their potential impact on the group’s image. This stage lasted roughly throughout the first half of 2007. The second stage began in the second half of 2007 as the blogging phenomenon transformed from a number of isolated cases into a mass movement and began to be perceived as a threat to the organization, especially after draw-

21 “El-Fagreya,” <http://elfagreya.blogspot.com>.

22 “Daughter of Islam,” <http://bentellislam.blogspot.com>.

23 “The El-Erian Daughters,” <http://banatelerian.blogspot.com>.

24 “Khirat el-Shater,” <http://www.khirat-elshater.com>.

ing attention from newspapers and television media. At this point, many in the leadership felt that the blogging had to be stopped, while others wanted to look into the phenomenon and find ways of dealing with it. Toward this end, some leaders sought to meet with the bloggers, whether on the sidelines of open events where questions of the freedom of expression are discussed, or in private meetings. Exemplifying the latter scenario, Dr. Mohammed Mursi, head of the Brotherhood's political department, held a meeting with a group of Brotherhood bloggers to hear their opinions and try to discuss their criticism of the organization.²⁵ The meeting between Brotherhood leaders and bloggers signals just how worried the organization leadership has become, particularly given the Brotherhood's current dilemma – a crisis in its relationships both with the regime and the Egyptian political elite, resulting from the fallout after the draft party platform was announced.

It is apparent that there are two schools of thought within the Brotherhood on dealing with dissident bloggers in their ranks. The first still thinks the phenomenon should not be taken too seriously and that blogs are merely idle online chatter incapable of sapping the organization's grassroots support base, which is more in line with the Brotherhood's positions. The second school argues that blogging is an expression of a new spirit flowing in the veins of the Brotherhood's base that needs to be absorbed and strengthened. This spirit also demonstrates the organization's intellectual vitality, and represents an excellent opportunity to improve the external image of the Brotherhood as an organization open to diverse viewpoints. However, proponents of this view still believe that flexible controls must be implemented to soften criticism of the Brotherhood, while absorbing the bloggers and using them for political mobilization.

The Brotherhood's interaction with the bloggers is not much different from their relationship with critics in general, particularly dissidents within the Brotherhood ranks. For the most part, this strategy is based on ignoring and containing such threats. Previously, the Brotherhood had rarely paid much attention to such criticism. Some observers argue that the Brotherhood was too busy with more pressing issues, such as managing its relations with the government and political forces, and so had no desire to spread its efforts thin by tackling peripheral issues. Others suggest that the

“In addition to the cadre of young male bloggers, young women associated with the Muslim Brotherhood have become part of the blogging movement ... an unparalleled development for the organization.”

25 Abdelmoniem Mahmoud, “A Meeting for Containing MB Youth?” *Al-Dustour*, October 27, 2007.

organization was concerned that responding to such critiques could set a precedent, opening the door of self-criticism that had been closed for decades, and bringing negative repercussions for organizational unity and cohesion. However, it is hard to believe that these strategies will succeed in stopping the Brotherhood bloggers from openly recording their positions on the organization's political and intellectual performance. This is a practical view, since such a move would fuel the stereotype of the Brotherhood suppressing dissent, in line with what its detractors claim.

Implications for Brotherhood Blogging

The phenomenon of blogging by young dissident Brotherhood activists has far-reaching implications, and is tantamount to letting the views of the Brotherhood's internal relations out of the closet. Until recently, no one could have imagined that some of the Brotherhood's youngest members would criticize their leaders so openly. These blogs crossed many of the Brotherhood's accepted boundaries on members' behavior. These critiques, even if they are not taken seriously, represent a deviation from the Brotherhood's carefully cultivated air of secrecy. The blogs have also altered the image of the Muslim Brotherhood, since they gave many Internet-savvy Egyptians first-hand exposure to the ideas floating around in the organization. This gives the Brotherhood's leaders – should they manage to capitalize on the suggestions of their young activists – a chance to improve the stereotype of their organization held by many ordinary Egyptians. All told, the Brotherhood blogs are a defiant gesture in the face of the stifling ideological control exerted by some mid-level group leaders. Blogging represents a real challenge to the Muslim Brotherhood's status quo, and the Brotherhood must quickly adapt in order to ensure its future survival. ■

Dear John

Letter from a Saudi Blogger

MOSFER BIN SALEH AL-WADEE

Blogger, Journalist, and Pro-Reform Activist; Saudi Arabia

DEAR AMERICAN BLOGGER,

You are an American living in the West, and I am a Saudi Arab living in the Middle East. Despite our disparate locations, at the end of the day we share the same world. Not only are we united by our very humanity, but we also share much more than that: We have the same hopes, ambitions and destiny, and are similar in our passions and free will. Together we adore freedom and dignity, and aspire to a better life. I am addressing this message to you, an American blogger, because bloggers represent one component of American society that I still trust; a segment of American society with integrity, belief in freedom, and other values for which generations of Americans sacrificed their lives.

First, I would like to tell you about myself. I live in the Arabian Peninsula, which, according to legend, was first inhabited by our ancestor, Yaarab. His descendants poured out of the Peninsula to settle much of Southwest Asia and Africa, including Iraq, the Levant, North Africa and the Horn of Africa. Though they later would divide into distinct confessional and political sects, Arabs are still united by history, language, blood and culture. While one cannot ignore the subtle cultural differences among us – which have formed from the cultural cross-pollination of other peoples inhabiting the Middle East throughout history – a single Arab culture remains. This sole entity cuts across our state borders, shaping our destiny as Arabs. It is impossible for me, as a Saudi, not to be affected by what happens to an Iraqi, an Egyptian, a Syrian, or a Yemeni.

You may have stereotypes about me and my country, through what you see in the media. Perhaps you picture me composing this message wearing a belt made of explosives, or lovingly polishing my RPG (rocket-propelled grenade). Maybe you think that people here are simply affluent Bedouins who know nothing but violence and sadism. I can excuse you for thinking so, despite the countless Americans who have visited Saudi Arabia, met its people, and left with positive impressions. Even so, I cannot disguise the fact that a wave of hatred toward the United States has spread among the people here. It didn't used to be like this. Arabs, by nature, are friendly, open people who welcome strangers, and love exploring the unknown, characteristics that helped to build such a rich Arab culture.

The Saudis of my generation used to look to Western civilization with admiration and respect, emulating aspects of its culture despite having great pride in their own.

“Maybe you think that people here are simply affluent Bedouins who know nothing but violence and sadism.”

Along with Arab music, they listened to Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson. They read great Western authors such as Ernest Hemingway, and relished American fare like hamburgers and Coca-Cola. I fondly recall the Western professors, Americans in particular, who my classmates and I considered close friends during college and afterwards. The dream for

countless ambitious Arab youth was to study in one of America's universities – among the most prestigious in the world – and then return to their native countries in order to contribute to economic development.

Throughout our young lives, we never sensed the conflict simmering in our relationship with the United States. It did not occur to anyone at the time that there were those among us spreading the seeds of sectarian and anti-American hatred, and that an American presence in our everyday lives would one day be viewed with suspicion.

Despite their admiration for the United States, many of the young Arab men and women who studied there throughout the 20th century were taken aback by the stereotypes of their people perpetuated by the American media. Hollywood and American television portrayed, and continue to portray, Arabs, and Saudis in particular, as either bearded religious extremists preparing for suicide bombings, or well-heeled, profligate simpletons reveling in the oppression of women. In the eyes of many Arab youth, the post-Sept. 11, 2001, United States is a dangerous place to travel, where a visitor can be arrested on trumped-up charges. This fear is not unfounded. For example, Saudi graduate student Homaidan al-Turki was sentenced to 28 years in prison in 2006 for having allegedly enslaved an Indonesian maid, though most Saudis believe that he is

innocent. Furthermore, stories of Saudi students facing harassment by immigration officials in U.S. airports, and from some of your own extremists, abound.

As if the experience of Saudis in the United States were not enough, views of the country are exacerbated by U.S. policy toward the Arab world. In the view of many Arabs, the United States is:

- An arrogant superpower trying to control the Arab world through occupation, sowing divisions, and political destabilization, all with the goal of controlling Arab oil and other natural resources.
- Trying to turn the Middle East into a market for American products, ranging from arms to everyday consumer products, with no regard for the damage inflicted on regional economies.
- Supporting dictatorial regimes, without pressuring them to enact genuine reform unless such reform would be in America's best interest.
- The number one human rights violator in the world through its practices in Guantanamo and CIA secret prisons across Eastern Europe, the Middle East and South Asia. Most Arabs believe that the three Saudis who reportedly committed suicide in Guantanamo, in fact died from so-called "enhanced interrogation methods," in other words, torture.
- Trying with all its might to stifle independent media by targeting critical journalists, as happened with Tariq Ayoub (killed in Baghdad), and Sami al-Hajj (held in Guantanamo since 2001), both Al-Jazeera journalists. According to Reporters without Borders, from March 2003 to March 2006, ten journalists were killed by the U.S. military.

All these views constitute a universally negative image of the United States among Arabs, and fuel Arab anti-Americanism. Unfortunately, the American media neglects to cover the aspects of U.S. policy that so alarm most Arabs, and instead blames growing hostility toward the United States on religious extremist forces allegedly controlling Arab societies. Though religious extremism is certainly present in the Middle East, Western journalists are remiss in suggesting that radicalism is the source of all anti-U.S. sentiment in the Arab world.

Extremism is not only a problem for us in the Middle East. As a well informed blogger you must know, religious and secular extremist groups thrive in the United States, yet Americans have an inexplicably greater capacity to separate U.S. extremism from the rest of America than to understand that Saudi radicals do not speak for all Saudis. Nor would an American mistakenly consider the American people sadistic

because he had conflated U.S. human rights violations with the American people. If only Americans could understand that Saudi culture is no more monolithic, and we, too, deserve consideration apart from the faults and wrong-headed ideas of our countrymen.

As bloggers sharing a common media and shared values, but straddling worlds divided by more than distance, ours is a heady task: we must earnestly try to repair American-Arab relations. In pursuing this goal we must remember that formal political exchanges have often burgeoned the gap between our worlds rather than closed it. We must remember, too, that cultural exchange and good faith interaction has always brought Arabs and Americans closer together. There is still hope for Arab-Western relations, particularly in the arena of activists and intellectuals in civil society. As the technological vanguards of this segment of society, can we together stand in the face of the destruction wrought by cultural and political misunderstanding? This is my sincere hope. ■

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Saudi Women's Rights Stuck at a Red Light

ASMAA AL-MOHAMED

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PERHAPS NOWHERE IN THE WORLD do women lead a stranger life than in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Saudi women constantly endure being treated like second-class citizens, even as men refer to them as “well-kept pearls and hidden treasures.” Despite everything said about the importance of women, women's rights are still a chink in the Saudi state's armor, and one of the most hotly debated, yet murkiest, topics in the country. It is difficult to even prioritize the long list of challenges facing Saudi women, which range from their political and legal disenfranchisement, to their curtailed liberties and restraints imposed by their legal guardians. The humanitarian crises facing women in Saudi Arabia are extreme and there is often limited recourse for women who have suffered sexual abuse or rape. However, this article will primarily focus on those offenses that are permissible, not just in practice, but also under the Saudi legal framework.

Struggling by Neighborhood Standards

Glancing at the countries bordering Saudi Arabia, which share similar customs, traditions and tribal affiliations with the Kingdom, women in the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries enjoy more robust political and civil rights. In Bahrain, for instance, women have served in parliament and as ministers, whereas Saudi women still need a *mahram* (a close male relative such as a father, son or uncle) to accompany them even to the supermarket. Other GCC countries, meanwhile, have used quota

systems to guarantee women a place in parliament, where they mix freely with men and engage in face-to-face debate, enjoying true equality. Women from the other Gulf states represent their countries as ambassadors – unaccompanied by male supervisors – whereas in Saudi Arabia, a woman’s male guardian is required to give signed permission (either open or for a defined period of time) in order for her to travel at all.

There are striking examples of women in the other GCC countries serving as ministers, such as Kuwait University Political Science Professor Masouma al-Mubarak, who was the first Kuwaiti female minister (See al-Mekaimi, page 54). She success-

“Saudi society can accept women’s success in various fields, but cannot accept seeing or coming into direct contact with them.”

fully served in a variety of ministry posts, first as minister of planning, then as minister of administrative development affairs, then minister of transportation, and finally as minister of health in the 2007 cabinet. Saudi women, by comparison, are still not allowed to enter parliament as anything more than advisors; they cannot vote, much less serve as represen-

tatives. Even stranger, when Saudi men deem it necessary to consult women – generally on the more trivial local or social affairs – interaction between the sexes occurs only via video conferencing. The six women who serve as parliamentary advisors, the only political position women have attained in Saudi Arabia, seem to be there less in a serious capacity and more as décor.

Dr. Nora Alyousif, one of the Kingdom’s six state-appointed parliamentary advisors, denies that her position is merely a diversionary tactic, meant to distract from the plight of Saudi women.¹ She highlights the progress that has been made in Saudi Arabia, which has allowed a woman like her to become an advisor to the oil ministry: “The Saudi leadership is working hard on reform and supporting women ... Seventy years ago we were completely isolated from the world. The changes which are taking place are unmistakable, and we have finally started opening up.” Alyousif maintains that Saudi women, thanks to King Abdullah, have been given “a strong push for participation, and we have noticed a number of women and female ministerial representatives joining the king on his foreign tours.”

Alyousif attributes the lack of a political role for Saudi women to educational decisions: “Very few Saudi women major in political science, and this major used to be closed to women. By restructuring some of the universities and providing the major [to women], we are establishing the beginning of a new era in which young women study

1 Author interview with Nora Alyousif, March 20, 2007.

politics academically before applying it on the ground.” However, a careful analysis of the powers female Saudi officials possess shows that their positions are superficial. For example, Princess Dr. al-Jawhara bint Fahd al-Saud was undersecretary of education for women's colleges for 10 years before becoming president of Riyadh University for Women in April 2007. And yet, in a conference on women's rights, she told hundreds of women that as undersecretary she “did not have the necessary powers to make decisions, even though this position is the third highest ranking in the Ministry of Education.”²

Women out of the Public Eye

In addition to the bleak political reality, there is a tacit ban on showing women in the media, though it is not illegal to do so. Women also have no protection should they be physically attacked for appearing in the media. Broadly speaking, Saudi society can accept women's success in various fields, but cannot accept seeing or coming into direct contact with them. Nonetheless, Saudis are complicit in hardliners' heaping abuse upon “rebellious” women who make their success known publicly through the media. This seclusion of women through censorship is by no means restricted to the working classes, and even women in the royal family are subject to the same restraints. Saudi princesses had never appeared in the pages of the local newspapers until May 2005, when Princess Loulwa al-Faisal, daughter of the late King Faisal, served as a delegate in a Saudi trade mission to the United States.

Although Saudi women are allowed to have their own identity cards, this right is not absolute, since their legal guardians have the authority to prevent women from obtaining these cards. Moreover, the law has not made identity cards obligatory for women. Some Saudis are known to even cover female relatives' pictures with black tape, lest the images prove too arousing. Travel restrictions are also imposed on women, who need the permission of a guardian to leave the country. In some cases, the guardian is a younger brother, no older than 20, forbidding a sister with a PhD to travel. Thus, women are almost completely sequestered from public space in the kingdom, not only in images, but in person. The dire consequence of this status quo is that even more fundamental women's rights, those relating to their security, health and general well-being, are kept from the fore, leaving no chance for much-needed change.

Overbearing Legal Guardians

The thorny issue of the legal guardian affects every detail of a Saudi woman's daily life. She goes to school with permission from her guardian. She works as he pleases,

2 *Al-Hayat*, local edition, November 30, 2006.

and he can force her to leave the job at any time. The legal guardian can either pressure a woman to get married and take her dowry, or refuse to marry her off and keep her income, all with the blessing of Saudi law. Moreover, this situation persists even though Islam prescribes financial independence for women. In a bold attempt to rebel against the authority of legal guardians, Hoda al-Geresi, chairwoman of the board for the women's branch of the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce, sent an open letter to King Abdullah arguing that Cabinet decision 120/2004, which addresses some aspects of women's independence, has still not been implemented. The decree, passed three years ago, aims to facilitate employment for women, and includes provisions opening women's centers to safeguard women against abusive legal guardians.³ Speaking on behalf of businesswomen, al-Geresi criticized government interference that obstructs women from investing in a number of business ventures, in addition to the difficulties faced by Saudi businesswomen in obtaining permits for certain activities.

In addition to the Saudi businesswomen who oppose the current legal guardian policies, there are a number of enlightened men who also openly denounce the

“Al-Fawzan has called for the government to put men and women on equal footing in investment, so as to free up the estimated one billion riyals (\$267 million) or more currently in women’s bank accounts.”

guardianship law. Dr. Abdullah Al-Fawzan, a sociology professor at King Saud University, argued for rethinking the current statutes and passing laws that prevent Saudi men from dominating women, which would clear the way for women to play a more critical role in the economy. Al-Fawzan has called for the government to put men and women on equal footing in investment, so as to free up the estimated one billion riyals (\$267 million) or more currently in women's bank accounts.

Al-Fawzan reasons that the administrative and legislative framework in Saudi Arabia “was designed to empower men. We live in a patriarchal society, and so the government should support women.”

Although the government has recognized that economically integrating women begins with education, and has accordingly improved educational opportunities for women, the next fundamental step is to boost the number of Saudi women in the workplace. Currently, roughly 300,000 Saudi women work, comprising 5 percent of the Saudi national labor force. Ironically, the constraints on female employment mean that women in the workforce are generally much better qualified than men, with half

3 *Al-Hayat*, local edition, February 21, 2007.

of working women possessing a college degree, compared to only 16 percent of men. Trying to describe this situation, Loulwa al-Saidan, a Saudi real estate investor, bitterly repeated an aphorism that has become common in the Kingdom:

'Everything is available for women in Saudi Arabia.' For me to go to any government agency or to the court to buy or sell property, as a woman I am obligated to bring two men as witnesses to testify to my identity, and four male witnesses to testify that the first two are credible witnesses, and actually know me. Where is any woman going to find six men to go with her to the court?! It's hard for me to get my legal rights, and a lot of women complain to me about this. Word has even spread among the women that the solution is to use one's connections, pay a bribe or be sharp-tongued.

Sexual Harassment and Abuse in Saudi Arabia

Even though reliable statistics on levels of sexual harassment and abuse in Saudi Arabia are difficult to find, it is clear that they are major problems. Segregation and severe sexual repression fuel sexual harassment and, the patriarchal nature of society and lack of political and economic empowerment for women exacerbate the situation. A troubling dimension of sexual harassment in the Kingdom is widespread sexual abuse by male relatives. According to Sohila Zain Ulabdin, a member of the National Society for Human Rights, a Saudi human rights advocacy NGO:

Those harmed by harassment and rape by relatives at different ages are often the minors or young girls of divorced mothers. The problem usually begins with the father obtaining custody of the girls. The father himself becomes the first to abuse them, followed by brothers, then more distant relatives, and there are even cases of rape and pregnancy, whereupon the girl may be tried and imprisoned. The abusive male is rarely punished, unless it happens to be a case drawing attention, whereupon the criminal is jailed for a short period, then returns to carry out his crimes again.⁴

On the Bright Side of Things

Despite all the aforementioned negative aspects of Saudi women's experience, there are several positive developments to note, though they are few and far between. First is the increasing role of women in civil society, as evidenced by activist efforts to open pro-women's rights organizations, the establishment of a mobile center for reporting sexual harassment, and the launch of a program to confront violence against women

⁴ *Al-Arabiya*, September 11, 2007, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2007/09/11/39002.html>.

“As a woman I am obligated to bring two men as witnesses to testify to my identity, and four male witnesses to testify that the first two are credible witnesses, and actually know me.”

and children. These developments hint at a substantial shift in the character and agenda of Saudi civil society. The shift began with the approval of the creation of the Saudi Journalists’ Syndicate in 2003, followed by a March 9, 2004 royal decree to establish the National Institution for Human Rights, and continued with another decree on Sept. 12, 2005 to set up the Saudi Committee for Human Rights.

However, the size and role of these organizations remain hostage to the problems within Saudi society. For instance, charities comprise some of the oldest and strongest organizations in Saudi civil society, and are mostly led by women. Yet these are public-interest organizations, and while some of them provide services like shelter to victims of domestic violence, they are still far from firmly standing up for women’s rights. Their autonomy is also subject to the passage of legislation.

There are also a number of instances, albeit sporadic, of Saudi women rising to prominence in various fields. Dr. Nora al-Nahed, a professor of family and community medicine, was named the director of the UN Population Fund’s office for the Gulf region, headquartered in Oman. In the financial sector, Lubna Olayan is the chief executive of Olayan Financing, and is on the board of several other leading companies. *Time* magazine listed her as one of the world’s 100 most influential people in 2005, and the Arabic-language *Forbes* magazine ranked her as the most powerful businesswoman in the Arab world. Olayan is an active participant in the annual World Economic Forum, co-chairing it in 2005, and is one of the trustees of the Arab Thought Foundation.

Another obstacle facing Saudi women is their virtual banishment from performing in or attending the arts, theater and sports. A Saudi woman performed on stage for the first time in Riyadh in 2005, while Saudi women first sat in the audience during a men’s theatrical performance at an academic institution in 2006. However, these bursts of activism remain sporadic, and hardly represent the crystallization of a changed cultural view of the relationship between women and the arts.

Although women in Saudi Arabia are banned from forming sports clubs, this does not stop them from finding creative ways to take part in sporting events. For instance, Saudi women travel to neighboring countries to cheer on the national soccer team, and locally, female students in Saudi cities can celebrate soccer victories or other events as long as they still observe the strict dress code, of course. However, these are only faint glimmers of hope that barely distract from the structural crisis that Saudi women face. The problems still facing women in Saudi Arabia are overwhelming and multifaceted,

rooted in, and perpetuated by tribal, cultural and religious dynamics. A sad irony is that women outnumber men in Saudi universities, yet are unable to use their talents for economic empowerment and independence. As more Saudis and foreigners press for reform, perhaps that faint glimmer of hope will grow into a ray of light for the next generation of Saudi women. ■

Kuwaiti Women's Tepid Political Awakening

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MORE THAN TWO YEARS SINCE the affirmation of women's political rights in Kuwait on May 16, 2005, the actual participation of Kuwaiti women in political life remains as controversial a subject as it has been for more than three decades. The modest performance of Kuwaiti women in the 2006 legislative elections revealed that there are significant obstacles to political participation for women, including their participation in voting and running for office. At the beginning of the nomination process for these elections, 30 women announced their candidacies. However, only 24 actually entered the elections, and of those, not one went on to win a seat. Was this a sign of Kuwaiti women's political consciousness in decline? Or, did traditional and Islamic currents overshadow the call for the expansion of women's political rights?

In light of Kuwait's existing cultural and social structure, it is not expected that this situation will witness any significant changes in the near future. In addition, gerrymandered electoral districts have imposed new problems, shrinking the number of districts and multiplying the effort required to carry out successful bids for public office. This article will discuss the ambiguities of Kuwaiti women's political participation in light of the existing political and social landscape. Drawing on the parliamentary election experiment in 2006 – when women candidates failed to obtain any electoral seats – as an important lesson, this article will look at the prospect of transforming women's political rights from policy into actual practice.

Historical Overview of Women's Rights in Kuwait

There are three salient features of women's political rights in Kuwait. First, these rights have not been entirely absent, but rather have been fractured throughout history. Kuwaiti women have enjoyed many economic and social rights, and even some political rights in the past, but suffrage and candidacy for office remained restricted to men for several decades. During its nascent years, the state offered women several fields of education, including engineering and political science, which had been limited to men in other Gulf countries. Similarly, women were permitted to hold many diplomatic positions. Nabila al-Mulla, for example, who headed the permanent Kuwaiti delegation to the United Nations, was the first female ambassador from the Gulf region. Women held many other positions as well, including posts as university presidents, ministry representatives, and editors-in-chief of principal newspapers in Kuwait. Nor

“The [Kuwaiti] constitution supports the principle of equality regarding the rights of men and women in all areas, including politics.”

were Kuwaiti women absent from Kuwaiti election campaigns, as they supported many candidates – especially those who called for the affirmation of women's political rights.

Second, the Kuwaiti Constitution does not restrict women's political rights. Indeed, the constitution supports the principle of equality regarding the rights of men and women in all areas, including politics. Articles 6, 7, 8 and

29 of the constitution¹ stipulate the equality of rights and duties among all citizens as a basis for real citizenship. However, women's political participation was hampered with the enactment of Election Law 35 in 1962, which restricted the right to vote and run for office solely to men. While certainly unconstitutional, opponents of Election Law 35 could not contest its legitimacy in a constitutional court, because private citizens have no legal standing to challenge the constitutionality of any law. Therefore, the struggle against the restraints imposed on women's political rights in Kuwait remained confined to combating the law on its merits, without consideration of the Kuwaiti Constitution. Consequently, the forces supporting women's political rights, especially liberal forces and feminist movements, appealed to judges and officials of the constitutional court to amend the law. However, the weakness of, and differences among these progressive forces have had a negative impact on those efforts. The 1960s, which witnessed the birth of the Kuwaiti state, its constitution and parliament, saw

¹ To view the Kuwaiti Constitution in its entirety (English language), log onto <http://www.kuwait-info.com/sidepages/cont.asp>.

nationalist and leftist-nationalist currents shaping national politics, and none of these trends addressed the issue of granting women their political rights. The situation did not change with the retreat of the leftist camp and the rise of Islamist forces. Thus, the first public demand for the women's political rights did not emerge until 1973.

Third, the affirmation of women's political rights in Kuwait came in the wake of widespread international and regional criticism of the restrictions imposed on women. The most notable example was the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' June 2004 demand that Kuwait address a list of issues, at the top of which was women's political, economic, social and cultural rights.² Similarly, the International Union of Parliaments issued a report on Arab parliaments in 2005, which emphasized the improvements made in women's rights throughout the Arab world with the exceptions of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Feminists, Islamists and the Battle for Hearts and Minds

One important distinction in the otherwise slow emergence of social and political forces supporting women's political rights in Kuwait was the appearance of feminist movements during the 1960s and 1970s. These movements provoked a religious response, which led to the revival of strong religious currents at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, during which Islamists won a foothold in parliament. Islamists had seen a Western agenda and an effort to Westernize Kuwaiti society in these feminist movements, trends that threatened Kuwait's conservative social and cultural norms. Islamists feared the feminist movements' agenda would lead to the emergence of social maladies, such as the disintegration of the family and the breakdown of social cohesion. To rival the feminist movements, Islamist factions established a number of women's associations focusing on women's social matters and volunteer work, all the while opposing women's political participation. These associations infiltrated the ranks of middle-class women, who had varying degrees of education. That infiltration, in turn, had a negative impact on the fate of women's political rights. The Islamic faction was also able to take control of a number of civil society associations, such as the Student Union, the unions of science faculties, the Teachers Society, and the Women's Committee of the Social Reform Society. The Islamist movement was able to secure the support of these domestic organizations and civil society groups in opposing women's political rights, all based on a traditional discourse that conflated the affirmation of those rights with the loss of cultural and social values and an agenda of Westernization.

2 *Al-Qabas* (Kuwait), June 26, 2004, 9.

The Islamic movement suffered, however, when the liberal-leaning Women's Socio-Cultural Association, an organization that united business-class and educated middle-class women, demanded the affirmation of women's political rights. According to Shaykha al-Nisf, president of the Women's Socio-Cultural Association:

Our association is the only association in Kuwait that has demanded, since the 1960s until today, that women be granted political rights. It is no secret that the positions of other associations have been to refuse these rights – even the proclamation of the princess for Kuwaiti women to be granted their political rights, which was a 180-degree reversal of her earlier stance on the issue [of the right to political participation].³

The dominance that the Women's Socio-Cultural Association had over the Islamic movement at the time was short-lived, and the association lost ground by appearing too elitist, ultimately enabling the Islamic movement to regain popular support. The religious factions succeeded in depicting the feminist discourse on political rights as a paltry discussion that sought personal gain. These religious factions set the Women's Socio-Cultural Association's call for equality at odds with the broader popular discourse aimed at guarding the interests of women who wanted to improve their standard of living, obtain better work conditions, improve social welfare, and other social issues.

Yet religious factions were not successful on their own in overpowering the women's issue. They were aided by alliances with tribal powers, and benefited from other social obstacles to enfranchising women. As a testament to the influence of this synergy, one must note that the subversion of the feminist movement proceeded despite increased education of women within the tribes, including university education, and increased work opportunities. In some cases, the position of the religious factions, including that of the Muslim Brotherhood, was deeply influenced by tribal forces from the outset. In contrast to the position held by their mother organizations in Egypt and Jordan, the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood opposed political rights for women because of the tribal forces' control over the group, and in order to compete with the Kuwaiti Salafist organizations that intensely opposed women's political participation.

Important figures within these Islamic and tribal forces did not hesitate to use various media to sharply criticize the demand to expand women's political rights. One Islamic parliamentarian warned that women entering parliament would herald

3 *Al-Qabas*, February 5, 2005, 38.

the entry of derelicts, deviants and homosexuals.⁴ Another member of parliament went as far as to suggest that elevating women to political equality with men is apostasy; a third declared that affirming women's political rights would be a disgrace to the legislature.⁵ However, these attacks were met with fierce reaction from liberal reformers. The Women's Socio-Cultural Association took legal action against the parliamentarian that equated the entry of women into parliament with the entry of derelicts, deviants and homosexuals. The association won their suit, and the parliamentarian immediately paid a fine of 5,000 Kuwaiti dinars. The other two members of parliament were forced to present written apologies that were published in local newspapers after liberals launched an aggressive campaign condemning their remarks.⁶

“One Islamic parliamentarian warned that women entering parliament would herald the entry of derelicts, deviants and homosexuals.”

Another factor limiting women's political enfranchisement was the shift from a 10-district electoral system to a 25-district system in 1981. Many members of parliament were inclined to limit electoral rights to men out of a desire to protect their electoral seats and guarantee easy success in the elections; limiting political rights to men, these members reasoned, guaranteed their ability to honor the wishes and needs of voters personally and directly by eliminating any friction in the interaction between male candidates and male voters.

The Religious Movement Takes Up Women's Political Rights

The religious movement's views toward women's political rights began to change when the tribal-religious alliance started to face many local, regional and international pressures to amend its position on the issue. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait was subject to a great deal of criticism from the mother branches in Egypt and Jordan because the former did not recognize women's rights. As a compromise, the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait opted to support the right of women to run for office, but not to vote.

4 *Al-Qabas*, January 4, 2006, 1.

5 *Al-Anbaa'* (Kuwait), March 1, 2005, 1.

6 'Ali al-Baghli, "Rejected Logic," *Al-Qabas*, March 5, 2005, 17. It is important to note that on January 4, 2006, the Court of Appeals fined Representative Walid al-Tabtabae 5,000 Kuwaiti dinars as a short-term compensation for the interest of the Women's Socio-Cultural Association due to his attack on those calling for women's political rights and his description of them as though they "wanted to sabotage the family, Westernize society, and spread homosexuality and depravity." *Al-Qabas*, January 4, 2006, 1.

The most important changes regarding women's political rights in Kuwait occurred within the Salafi camp. In the mid-1990s, Salafists witnessed divisions that led to the appearance of the new group called the Scientific Salafis, who represented the youth generation that did not agree with a number of traditional Salafi stances, including the control of the older generation over key positions within the movement. A further offshoot of the Scientific Salafis, the Umma Party, adopted a number of progressive stances in the realm of political reform, assuring support for women's political participation, and calling for the preservation of the party system, parliamentary

“Among the 24 female candidates in these elections, few were well-known, and many were new to the Kuwaiti political scene.”

government and the principle of a peaceful transfer of power. However, the party emphasized the need to apply these ideas in accordance with the group's Salafi ideological framework. Despite contradictions between some of the party's ideas and positions, its progressive positions on women's political participation led to the weakening of the

Salafi authority that had originally opposed enfranchising women. This, in turn, led to the severe crippling of these movements, which as a result of these developments, was forced to reformulate their discourse to emphasize that they were not against women's right to political participation for legal reasons, but rather they opposed those rights on the pretext of protecting society from Western values that would bring about the decline and corruption of Kuwaiti women.

After the Umma Party announced its position, the legal authority upon which the religious forces had based their opposition to the expansion of women's political rights weakened. This led to an environment in which the government could move toward passing suggested amendments to the election law. It is important to note that the Kuwaiti government played an important role in amending the election law by coordinating political groups in order to secure an amendment's passage on May 16, 2005.⁷ The government sought, in subsequent phases, to lay the foundation for further developments by appointing two female members to the municipal council, and assigning the planning ministry to a female minister (who later took on the health and transportation portfolios) – an indication that women's political roles in Kuwait had entered a new phase.

⁷ *Al-Qabas*, March 6, 2005. After the affirmation of those rights, the International Union of Parliaments' (IPU) website included Kuwait on an honorary list titled “Women Suffrage.” The list details the continued progress of the affirmation of women's political participation in the election process in different countries around the world.

Why Did Kuwaiti Women Fail During the 2006 Elections?

Despite these developments, and despite high expectations for the parliamentary elections in the summer of 2006, women's performance in those elections was markedly modest – whether as voters or candidates – dashing the hopes of many reformers. An examination of voter positions during these elections points to the fact that in some instances, women voters sought to bring down important figures associated with the liberal movement who had played a pivotal role in affirming women's political rights. The most distinct example of this is the case of the Abdullah al-Salem suburb in the 2nd district, in which Mohammed al-Mutayer, a candidate sympathetic to religious currents, and Marzouk al-Ghanem, one of the new faces on the political scene, unexpectedly won seats.

The timing of the elections and the relative novelty of women's eligibility may have also played a role in female candidates' defeat. Among the 24 female candidates in these elections, few were well-known, and many were new to the Kuwaiti political scene, and had engaged in no known political activity prior to running for office. After parliament's decision to hold early elections in the summer of 2006, rather than at the appointed time in the summer of 2007, many credible female candidates opted to abstain from participating for fear of being defeated in their first political experience.

Other challenges faced the female candidates in these elections, the most important being their lack of political experience, the similarity of their electoral campaigns, and the absence of coordination among female candidates in selecting districts (numerous candidates were unjustifiably present in some districts while totally absent in others). However, these difficulties do not negate some of the positive effects of the summer 2006 elections. Specifically, the vote challenged the prevailing belief that the issue of political participation is an elitist issue, shook the social and political isolation of Kuwaiti women, and emphasized the existence of a general communal culture that safeguards the importance of women's political participation.

The delay in complete enfranchisement of Kuwaiti women, and women's failure to take seats in parliament during the summer 2006 elections may be a setback, but by no means mitigate the impressive course of Kuwait gender rights reform. The affirmation of those rights through an elected parliamentary authority, as Kuwait witnessed in 2005, is a unique and pioneering experience in the Gulf, where reform usually stems from royal commands or decrees. Regardless of the results of the summer 2006 elections, women's political stock is rising, and will continue to do so if the success of reforms thus far is not forgotten. ■

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From Arabization to Arrogance

The Crisis of Arab Liberalism

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A STUDY OF THE STATE of Arab liberalism raises many important questions: When did the Arab consciousness begin to connect with liberal theory, and how were liberal ideas originally received? Which liberal ideas have preoccupied Arabs? How did they assess the implications of liberalism, and integrate the ideology into their political vision? Are there key characteristics distinguishing the interaction of the first Arab intellectual pioneers with liberalism from the interaction of today's Arab liberals? Most critically, what standing does liberalism enjoy in the Arab political consciousness today? This article will address these questions, and explain why liberalism remains one of the weakest intellectual movements in the contemporary Arab world.

Classical Arab Liberal Discourse

Arab thought had an early exposure to Western liberal discourse. After Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the defeat of the Moroccan army by a French expeditionary force at Isly in 1844, Arab intellectuals began to examine the reasons for their relative weakness compared to the strength they saw in the West. Upon scrutinizing Europe's cultural and social structures, they found liberal philosophy to be pervasive. Discussing the liberal cultural climate, which reigned in Europe during the 19th century, the Moroccan thinker Abdullah al-Arawi said: "We need not forget that liberalism in the last century was the air breathed by everyone in Western Europe who was conscious of himself and his rights. It was the general creed for educated Europeans,

such that it was almost synonymous with European thought.”¹ Though al-Arawi disregards alternative visions and philosophies that were present in 19th century Europe, such as Marxism and anarchism (which were both critical of capitalist liberalism), liberal thought set the ideological scene in Europe during this era, and other philosophical schools were genuinely of secondary importance. Even when some alternative ideologies crystallized in the form of dissenting movements, as was the case with socialism, they still did not enjoy the same level of legitimacy and social acceptability as did liberal thought.

“We need not forget that liberalism in the last century was the air breathed by everyone in Western Europe who was conscious of himself and his rights.”

Even though Arab thinkers encountered Western liberal ideology early in Arab colonial history, the former did not necessarily have the ability to fully grasp liberalism and generate insightful Arab scholarship. Accordingly, they could not repurpose liberal concepts to produce a political ideology that was appropriate for an Arab cultural context or articulate Arab counter-visions addressing the contradictions and shortcomings of liberalism. After more than 150 years of interaction with European liberal thought, critical scholarship fully absorbing liberalism in an Arab context is still absent. It is not an exaggeration to say that liberalism in Arab thought continues to take the form of a set of concepts, marketed primarily with propaganda and advertising slogans, rather than the logic of contemplation and rational deduction.

Arab liberalism is usually traced back to the pioneers of Arab Renaissance thought, such as Rifaat al-Tahtawi, Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh, Abdul-Rahman al-Kawakibi, Francis al-Marrash and Adib Ishaq. However, upon more careful inspection, it is clear that not everyone calling for freedom and attacking despotism is truly liberal. These pioneers did indeed utilize many liberal concepts, but they were taken as piecemeal ideas, and a consistent ideology that can be called liberalism was not adopted as an integrated paradigm.

Therefore, those pioneers were not true followers of liberalism; rather, they merely borrowed some of its tenets, and introduced elements of liberal thought into the Arab world. There are, however, some Arab Renaissance thinkers who should be regarded as authentic liberals. Among them are Francis al-Marrash (1835-1874) and Adib Ishaq (1856-1885). The other major thinkers of the 19th century used liberal concepts accompanied by references back to Arab and Islamic cultural heritage, giving the impres-

1 Abdullah al-Arawi, *Mafhoum al-Hurriyya*, 5th ed. (Beirut: Arab Cultural Center, 1993), 47.

sion that liberal ideas had Arab roots or direct parallels in Arab history, rather than in Western culture. Rifaat al-Tahtawi's 1834 book *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz (The Quintessence of Paris)* is the best example of this. While al-Tahtawi expresses admiration for a number of liberal concepts, whether regarding philosophy, politics or social behavior, his book reveals that he was neither enamored of the West, nor interested in emulating it. His book is highly critical of other aspects of the West, particularly in its discussion of liberal social values and moral behavior. There is a similar pattern in Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi's 1867 book *Aqwam al-Masalik fi Ma'rifat Ahwal al-Mamalik (The Surest Path to Knowledge Concerning the Condition of Countries)*. In short, both of these pioneers of the Arab Renaissance who first interacted with Western liberalism did not take liberalism as an intellectual paradigm to be imitated, but rather as a menu of useful ideas, and they took great care to couch liberal ideas in traditional Arab terminology and connotations.

If it would be misleading to call al-Tahtawi and al-Tunisi liberals, it would be even more deceptive to call al-Afghani and 'Abduh the same, despite how greatly the latter two valued freedom. These figures represent the heart of the modern Islamic awakening, and their beliefs, which at times resemble liberalism, are a product of their exploitation of European thought on the one hand, and their Islamic jurisprudential heritage on the other. With the exception of al-Marrash and Ishaq, progressive scholars did not comprise a distinct Arab liberal school of thought before the work of Lutfi al-Sayyid and Taha Hussein in Egypt at the beginning of the 20th century. Thus in classifying progressive trends in Arab thought, the early Arab Renaissance should be considered receptive of, but not shaped by Western liberalism. This was a period of discovery and the selective adoption of some liberal ideas, not the imitation of liberalism as a holistic paradigm.

Al-Tahtawi, in the section of his book, *Al-Murshid Al-Amin (The Trustworthy Guide)*, discussing freedom, says:

Freedom is stamped within the human heart by nature ... the rights of all the peoples of the civilized kingdom are due to freedom. Regarding its social structure, the kingdom is characterized by the possession of freedom, and each individual in this structure is free, allowed to move from house to house and place to place without harassment or compulsion, and do with himself, his time and his work as he pleases. No one stops him from that except for the limited obstacles in the law or politics which are required by the fundamentals of the just kingdom. Among the rights of civil freedom is that a person not be forced into exile from his country or be punished within it except by a legal or political ruling in accordance with the fundamentals of

the kingdom, and that he not be restricted in doing in his affairs as he wishes and not be expelled except by the rulings of his country.

Al-Tahtawi categorizes different types of freedom as natural freedom, freedom of behavior, religious freedom and political freedom.² Al-Tahtawi's language is filled with jurisprudential terms, not only cloaking liberal concepts in jurisprudential garb, but also asserting that human freedom is not unique to liberalism, but rather is also provided for within Islam. This is also the gist of his book *Manahij al-Albab (Systems of the Mind)*, in which he analyzes political concepts such as citizenship, equality, justice and constitutionalism. A similar theme runs throughout al-Tunisi's *Aqwam al-Masalik (The Best Road)*, notably when he writes:

The term freedom is uttered in [the Europeans'] practice with two meanings, one of them called personal freedom, which is freeing human behavior with regarding to oneself and one's earnings, with equanimity for all in front of the law, such that a person does not fear unjust, neither of himself nor of his other rights, and he is not ruled against with anything not proscribed in the country's laws approved by the councils.

Discussing how applicable this notion of freedom is in the Arab world, al-Tunisi asserts that "freedom and human ambition ... are the fountainhead of every craft."³

In *Umm al-Qura (Mecca)*, al-Kawakibi voices a similar opinion using fictional dialogues among Muslim scholars from towns across the Arab world who meet in Mecca. Through a character called al-Rumi, al-Kawakibi blames the crisis in the Arab world on a lack of freedom:

The calamity is our loss of freedom. What is freedom? We have been deprived of its meaning until we have forgotten it, and have been deprived from uttering it until we missed it ... among the branches of freedom are equal rights, holding the rulers accountable since they are representatives, freedom of speech, printing and scholarly research, and complete justice until no one fears an oppressor, an attacker or a traitor. It is also security in religion and life, security in dignity and honor, security in science and benefiting from it.

2 Rifaat al-Tahtawi, *Al-Murshid Al-Amin*, as part of *The Complete Works of Al-Tahtawi*, vol. 2 (Beirut: 1973), 373-374.

3 Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, *Aqwam al-Masalik fi Ma'rifat Ahwal al-Mamalik* [The Surest Path to Knowledge Concerning the Condition of Countries], (Tunis: 1977), 158.

To establish this concept's Islamic bona fides, he takes care to conclude that "[f]reedom is the spirit of religion."⁴ Given the persistent tendency of Arab Renaissance thinkers to root Western liberal values in Islamic terminology, one can surmise that these intellectuals were aware that for their writing to have any practical meaning it required the proper context.

There were numerous shortcomings in the liberal Arab Renaissance, particularly those stemming from its weak critical analysis of European liberal philosophy, and Arab thinkers' limited understanding of the prerequisites necessary to recreate genuine liberalism. Furthermore, this Arab movement did not recognize liberalism as a comprehensive paradigm, but rather equated it merely with liberation and freedom. This shortcoming may be due to the fact that the initial Arab appraisal of the Western system was distorted by what some scholars call "the shock of modernity." Upon encountering modern Western civilization, with its technological progress and ever-changing lifestyles, Arab observers may have been too overwhelmed to articulate a thoughtful, critical response. This may explain Arabs' lack of awareness of civilization as an integrated paradigm, and their subsequent effort to propound some appealing liberal ideas without giving due consideration to the integral, but less obviously important tenets of liberalism.

Despite all of these shortcomings, the progressive Arab Renaissance discourse was rooted in more scholarly, analytical thinking than the neo-liberal discourse that is ascendant today. The former presented liberalism as an idea with a strong theoretical foundation, even if that foundation was misrepresented or disingenuously concocted in Arab texts; the neo-liberal discourse in the contemporary Arab world presents liberalism as an invading soldier's creed, backed by the language of dictation and intimidation, an ideology that the Arab world is supposed to accept out of "shock and awe" of Western superiority.

Arab Neo-liberal Discourse

During the mid-20th century, progressive Arab scholarship began to taper as nationalist and leftist tendencies spread, and socialism became the hegemonic intellectual model – whether in its nationalist or Marxist-Communist manifestations. The rhetoric

“The calamity is our loss of freedom. What is freedom? We have been deprived of its meaning until we have forgotten it, and have been deprived from uttering it until we missed it.”

4 Abdul-Rahman al-Kawakibi, *The Complete Works* (Cairo: 1970), 154.

of individual freedom was not compatible with the collectivist, populist terminology of “liberating the people from the yoke of imperialism” or “freeing the masses from feudalism and imperialist capitalism.” The central concept in Arab intellectual thought during this period became social justice, rather than individual freedom.

However, after the Arab defeat in the 1967 war, the pan-Arab socialist model, so strongly tied to the national identities that the war bruised, was discredited, and the social theories supporting socialism were shaken. This opened a window of opportunity for an alternative ideological current to rise to prominence, and the Islamic movement did just that, quickly acquiring widespread influence and expanding to become a genuine mass movement. This outcome was unsurprising: Islamism had the historical and cultural grounding that allowed it to quickly transform into a mass movement in the Arab world. It relied, as it still does, on the Koran as its point of reference, and had the unique ability to draw on the social capital of Islam (as past progressives had tried to do by using Islamic jurisprudential vocabulary to discuss liberal ideals). Thus, political or rational choice models explaining the Islamic awakening in the 1970s might be more elegant than the notion that Islam is a fundamentally appealing social organizer in the Muslim world, but they are ultimately wrong.

In the early 1990s, a number of factors combined to leave liberalism standing virtually alone as a viable model in the Arab and Islamic world. These factors included the inability of the Afghan jihad to produce a model for a modern Islamic state, and the failure of other Islamist experiments such as the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria. The inability of the modern Islamist movement to produce a social vision conscious of its historical setting, coupled with the collapse of the socialist standard bearer (the Soviet Union), contributed to liberalism’s second awakening in the Arab world. With liberalism seemingly the only option, Arab liberal thinkers were quick to cite Francis Fukuyama and proclaim “the end of history.”⁵ With America the lone superpower, Arab liberals portrayed liberalism as an obligatory cultural paradigm that needed to be global and to dominate all societies, regardless of their cultural peculiarities.

During this historical moment, a neo-liberal intellectual and political elite surfaced in the Arab world, led by thinkers such as Ahmad al-Baghdadi (Kuwait), Shaker Nabulsi (Jordan), Dr. Sayyar al-Jamil (Iraq) and Kamal Ghobrial (Egypt). The irony is that even now, 15 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and at the beginning of their rise to prominence, these figures have yet to produce any coherent scholarship that articulates their ideology. Thus far, their vision has only been laid out in newspaper articles. While op-eds reach a broad audience, these articles are fluff, with little

5 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Avon Books, New York, 1992.

meaningful content. Though these notorious articles are usually sensational, they lack even rudimentary analysis, let alone rigorous scholarship.

Furthermore, the borderline impertinence of these neo-liberal writers' works demonstrates their inability to communicate genuinely with Arabs, especially when these writers call for liberalism to be infused into Arab political systems, even if on the backs of American tanks, as in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Yet this is not to accuse Arab neo-liberals of being unpatriotic or allied to a foreign power, though many of their critics allege just that. Putting aside alarmist rhetoric criticizing neo-liberalism, a critique of neo-liberal discourse that examines its shortcomings and contradictions is long overdue. This article only addresses the best scholarship that Arab neo-liberals have to offer, since the frantic, propagandistic rhetoric that characterizes some neo-liberal writing does not even merit consideration.

“Neo-liberal rhetoric holds that liberalism has incorporated everything good that humanity has produced, and more.”

The first notable feature of Arab neo-liberalism is that it sanctifies liberalism to some degree, elevating it to the status of more than just a school of thought, and turning it into a cultural absolute, superior to all other philosophies and ideologies. Thus, Arab neo-liberal thought leaves no room for alternative visions to rival liberalism's worldview and humanitarian values; neo-liberal rhetoric holds that liberalism has incorporated everything good that humanity has produced, and more. In other words, neo-liberals see liberalism as the pinnacle of human evolution and history. This is the view Dr. Sayyar al-Jamil – one of the most prominent Arab neo-liberals – conveys when he says, “Liberalism is the outcome of everything humankind has learned over the centuries.”⁶ Al-Jamil does, however, show a sense of perspective in assessing neo-liberalism when he writes, “I am not saying that neo-liberalism is revelation, or that it creates a perfect world, but it does at least realize a minimal level of human rights.”⁷ Despite this prudence, al-Jamil goes on to blame all the faults in liberalism on misapplication, and does not even consider the possibility that liberal theory itself might be flawed, perhaps lacking the components to properly function amid cultural norms different from those in which it was first developed.

As for al-Jamil's analysis of the core tenets of liberalism, there is no critical awareness, only mindless repetition. In outlining the foundational principles of the liberal

6 Sayyar al-Jamil, *Al-Libiraliyya al-qadima wa al-libiraliyya al-jadida* [“Old Liberalism and Neo-Liberalism”], *Al-Hewar Al-Mutamaddan*, Issue 1119, February 24, 2005.

7 *Ibid.*

school, al-Jamil argues, “The basic principles of liberalism are firstly: secularism, a term meaning the separation of religion from politics, and also implicitly meaning the separation of religion from human activity at large.”⁸ He makes this claim without empirical support for the need for such an expansive application of secularism, perhaps because evidence would contradict his notion of secularism. For example, the United States, presented in Arab neo-liberal discourse as the vanguard of liberalism, in fact blends liberalism with Judeo-Christian religious doctrine, both in its rhetoric and its actions.

Al-Jamil lists the principles of classical liberalism as secularism, rationalism, humanitarianism and utilitarianism, and asserts that these principles also define neo-liberalism: “New and old liberalism are not at all different except for the means they use, for the principles are the same and cannot ever be given up.”⁹ He then points to the disparity between the modern and classical liberal state of affairs, saying that classical liberalism “was connected to European thought and its results, whereas the new [liberalism] is connected to American thought and its practices.”¹⁰ Finally, al-Jamil attributes all critiques of neo-liberalism to anti-Americanism:

A number of Western writers, and behind them Arabs and Muslims, believe that if the first liberalism was a quantum leap for Europe on the issues of human rights and global development, then neo-liberalism – according to their short-sighted views – must be a setback for human rights, in plain view of a world which is no longer developed, but is rather utterly savage, not only Westerners, but Easterners, Northerners and Southerners as well. Such a distorted interpretation is produced by the ideas of people whose hatred for the U.S. is at a peak.¹¹

Despite later modifying his argument to say that he disapproves of America’s use of force to impose ideas, al-Jamil does not criticize the assumed necessity of globalizing neo-liberal ideas. Like other Arab neo-liberal writers, al-Jamil barely conceals his sense of superiority, attacking *ad hominem* those who disagree with neo-liberal ideas, even branding the former as freedom-hating terrorists. Disapprovingly, he says: “If the opponents of liberalism are ignorant of history and uninformed of politics and the media, then why do they throw out the baby with the bath water? Why do they bring this lowly agenda against the elements of reform and modernization?”¹² Unfortunately,

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

Arab audiences will always view this rhetoric as deeply antagonistic, yet al-Jamil is not alone among neo-liberals using such language.

Even more contemptuous of neo-liberalism's opponents is Dr. Ahmad al-Baghdadi. In the defense of liberalism, al-Baghdadi authored an article whose headline conveys the narrowness of his neo-liberal views: "Yes, Liberals are the Only Democrats."¹³ Al-Baghdadi boldly asserts that liberals are the only true democrats not only in "the Arab world, but [also] in every society,"¹⁴ though he fails to support this claim with rigorous analysis of unconventional democracies. The article lacks empirical analysis of the problems with liberalism that emerged during the course of its evolution, and ignores the prerequisites for its formation. Moreover, al-Baghdadi misinterprets the broader course of history when he ignores the elementary fact that democracy – at least within the context of European history – appeared in ancient Greece, some 23 centuries before the appearance of liberal theory and, of course, neo-liberal theory. "Is democracy not the invention of liberal thought to eradicate political and religious despotism?" al-Baghdadi adds.¹⁵ With neither evidence nor analysis, al-Baghdadi argues that liberalism is the only school of thought calling for equality among all humans, once again falling back on a leading rhetorical question rather than undertaking rigorous analysis: "Is liberalism not the only one calling for equality amongst humans?"¹⁶

Given his adulation of liberalism, al-Baghdadi's view that Arab neo-liberals are the best humanity has to offer is unsurprising.

Liberals in the Arab world are the only ones who adopt democracy, not only as a system of government, but also as a way of life. They are also the only ones to defend human rights and intellectual freedom, respecting the "other" for his very humanity, without any religious discrimination, and seek to institutionalize civil rights.¹⁷

"What should be a thriving intellectual movement [Arab neo-liberalism] has produced nothing but journalistic articles peppered with bombastic and unsupported assertions."

13 Ahmad al-Baghdadi, "Na'm, al-libiraliyyun wahdahum al-dimuqratiyun," ["Yes, Liberals are the Only Democrats"], in *Al-Libiraliyyun al-Judud* [The Neo-Liberals], ed. Shaker Nabulsi, 2005.

14 *Ibid*, 113.

15 *Ibid*, 113.

16 *Ibid*, 113.

17 *Ibid*, 114.

18 *Ibid*, 113-114.

As if it were not enough that al-Baghdadi gives liberalism a monopoly over all political virtues, al-Baghdadi even credits liberalism for the very continuation of human life: “Does liberalism not nourish and heal the world, and the world without it could not live?”¹⁸ Al-Baghdadi’s conclusion again reflexively smears his opponents as ignorant terrorists: “Liberals – for those who are ignorant – are against terrorism, against discrimination against women, for intellectual freedoms, against banning books, against segregated education, against banning teaching music, and for the constitution, democracy, and human rights without discrimination.”

Such fierce rhetoric, unfortunately, dooms the work of Arab neo-liberals. Thus what should be a thriving intellectual movement has produced nothing but journalistic articles peppered with bombastic and unsupported assertions; even the books produced by Arab neo-liberals want for any empirical basis. Sadly, their academic work shows no cognizance of the Arab reality, and the cultural and historical context of the Arab world. More troublingly, Arab neo-liberalism assumes the same close-mindedness that has curtailed other intellectual movements, and in doing so takes on a decidedly illiberal character. Little wonder, then, that neo-liberalism remains one of the weakest political and intellectual movements in the Arab world, despite the moment being ripe for liberal reform. ■

18 Ibid, 113-114.

Political Stagnation in Jordan Liberalism Falls Short

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IN THE WAKE OF JORDAN'S November parliamentary elections, in which the ruling party overwhelmed the Islamic Action Front (IAF), Jordan's Islamist opposition, hints of liberalism can be found, despite the illiberal circumstances of the vote. Notwithstanding the strict eligibility requirements for the election, the manipulation of voting districts to favor pro-government candidates, and the unsurprising victory by King Abdullah II's party, several notable liberals, such as Falak al-Jamaani, took seats. The outcome demonstrates that liberal tendencies, however sparse, are present. Jordan's experience with electoral politics has not included an explicitly liberal movement. While there have been hints of liberalism in government policy, civil society and Jordan's varied political parties, the country has yet to see a coherent movement for liberal reform. Liberal ideals have maintained a following among Jordan's political, intellectual and economic elite. Yet, liberal reform may be gaining ground as other ideological and political forces, such as leftists, nationalists and Islamists – important players in the socio-political arena – have also begun to adopt liberal principles.

This essay will discuss liberalism in different contexts: liberalism in politics demands rule of law, a democratic system, and equal human and civil rights; in economics, a strong private sector with an emphasis on property rights and privatization; lastly, in civil society, a respect for cultural and religious diversity.¹ This essay will outline the history of liberalism in Jordan, and the reasons for its inability to translate into an effective movement. The essay concludes with recommendations for developing and enhancing liberal discourse in Jordan.²

Timid Expressions of Liberalism

While Jordan has never had a strong, coherent movement for political liberalization, figures within the government and the opposition have embraced liberalism but without meaningful political will behind it. In light of predominant ideological currents, liberal discourse has historically been unable to make inroads in shaping policy.

On the economic front, some influential elites in Jordan's decision-making institutions have adopted liberal stances. This group calls for the global integration of the Jordanian economy, the speedy implementation of reform based on privatization, an increase in foreign investment and reduction of the state's economic role.³ While this elite group clearly adheres to the tenets of economic liberalism, its ties to the Royal Palace, lack of popular support and disinterest in democratic values suggest that its liberalism is not all encompassing.⁴ Some analysts and observers describe the current Jordanian political situation as "authoritarian liberalism" – liberal economic policies, but scarce democracy in the political sphere, including loose election laws allowing transfer of power, gaps in the protection of public freedoms, respect for human, individual and women's rights.⁵

The government has also evoked liberal principles in most of its recent initiatives – though they have been developed without broad popular participation – such as the "Jordan First" campaign, the "National Agenda" program, and the "We Are All Jordan" forum.⁶ These initiatives, however, were largely cosmetic, and intended to appease international pressure for democratic reform. Moreover, they monopolized the market for liberal rhetoric, leaving insufficient political space for a genuine liberal movement to develop independent of the official institutions.

1 For more on the multiple schools of liberalism and the characteristics of a liberal state, see Fahmi Guda'n, *fi al-khallas al-niha'i: maqal fi wa'oud al-islamiyyin wa al-'ilmaniyyin wa al-libiraliyyin* [The Final Word: A Treatise on the Promises of Islamists, Secularists and Liberals] (Amman: Dar al-Shuruq, 2007), 199-313. Compare this to Roger Scruton's *A Dictionary of Political Thought*. To look at liberalism's competing economic visions, see Friedrich Hayek's classic *Road to Serfdom* (Amman: The Misbah al-Hurriyya Institution, 2007).

2 Ibid.

3 Sufyan Alissa, an expert on Middle Eastern economics, labels this the "young, globalized elite," and puts forth a critical analysis of its economic and political role in his study "Rethinking Economic Reform in Jordan: Confronting Socioeconomic Realities," available at the following link: http://www.carnegiendowment.org/files/cmec4_alissa_jordan_final.pdf.

4 Ibid. Also see a controversial article published by Fawaz Zu'bi, a member of the Jordanian liberal economic elite and former minister of communications, in which he put forward the liberal elite's vision for political reform. In the article, he admitted that the Jordanian public sees this elite as isolated and unconcerned with its interests, "*La buda min musharikat al-qitaa' al-khas fi ta'miq masirat al-islam wa al-tahdith*" ["The Need for Private Sector Participation in Deepening the Course of Reform and Modernization"], *Al-Dustour*, May 16, 2005.

5 See Nahed Hattar, *Al-libiraliyya al-jadida fi muwajahat al-dimuqratiyya* [Neo-Liberalism Facing against Democracy] (Amman: Dar Azmina, 2003). Compare this to Faris Braizat, *Hiwar al-islam wa al-waqiyya al-siyasiyya fi al-urdunn* [Reform Dialogue and Realpolitik in Jordan], *Al-Hayat*, May 29, 2005; <http://arabic.tharwaproject.com/node/989>.

There are some political figures who employ liberal discourse, such as the former MP Tojan Faisal and Leith Shbeilat, MP and former Minister of Health Abdel Rehim Melhis, MP Mohamed Arslan, MP and former Prime Minister Taher al-Masri, and the politician Adnan Abu Auda. However, these individuals do not constitute a true liberal political movement. Furthermore, they lack consensus in their liberal discourse, whether regarding politics, economics or cultural affairs.⁷

Outside of the government institutions, various expressions of liberalism in civil society have flourished since the 1990s. Liberal concepts have been heralded by such institutions as human rights organizations, women's societies and think tanks. However, like the economic elite, these institutions suffer from structural deficiencies and elitist attitudes, and therefore hold little sway in society at large. The liberal institutions of Jordanian civil society suffer from the same problems haunting their counterparts in other Arab countries: most depend on foreign funding, which undermines their credibility among the Arab public. Furthermore, their leaders do not have powerful influence in the socio-political sphere. Another more pressing problem is that these institutions are isolated from each other, and generally avoid working in politics and rarely attempt venturing into political action, whether by allying with political parties during elections, or forming lobbies capable of effectively influencing the political process. In addition, these institutions avoid making any specific liberal demands that would result in confrontation with the ruling powers.

Leftist, nationalist, and Islamist parties in Jordan witnessed a transformation following the collapse of the Soviet Union; the end of Soviet support for leftist-commu-

“In light of predominant ideological currents, liberal discourse has historically been unable to make inroads in shaping policy.”

6 “Jordan First” is a national campaign (launched in October 2002) aimed at developing Jordan into a democratic and pragmatic state, according to the government. For more information, see http://www.mfa.gov.jo/pages.php?menu_id=437.

“We Are All Jordan” consisted of a forum in July 2006 where 700 local leaders came together, defining Jordan’s priorities with future policy implementation set. “Gov’t tasked with enacting ‘We are All Jordan’ recommendations,” *Jordan Times*, August 6, 2006, <http://www.jordanembassyus.org/08062006002.htm>.

7 Compare that to Mohamed Arslan, “*Muawwaqat iqaamat al-daula al-madaniyya ti al-watan al-arabiyy wa al-urdunn*” [“Hurdles to Founding the Civil State in the Arab World and Jordan”], <http://www.mp-arslan.com/home/content/view/104/44/>. Here we should mention that these figures are liberal in the loose sense, since they do not necessarily express liberal ideas in all their positions. Tojan Faisal and Leith Shbeilat demand liberal political reforms based on strengthening democracy and human rights, public freedoms, fighting corruption, and freedom of expression, but at the same time they have hard-line position towards Western policies, and clearly Faisal has a tendency towards nationalism, as does Shbeilat for Islamism. As for Mohamed Arslan and Taher al-Masri, despite their announced commitment to liberal values in principle, in practice they stay fairly close to the government line, without calling attention to the clear liberal gap between the government’s positions and its actual policies.

“The credibility of the Islamist movement’s democratic and liberal political values is still in question.”

rejecting conservative ideas about women, moral and social values, while adopting secularization and distinguishing between religion and politics in society.⁸

Despite the fact that these parties abandoned their demand that the state maintain complete economic control, they continue to be wary about liberalism itself because they see it as inextricably associated with the West and the United States. There is some confusion on the part of the nationalist, leftist and Islamist elites about the difference between the basic values of liberalism (freedom, human rights, a free economy, equality before the law) and those of neo-liberalism, which are laden with interventionist policies carried out by international financial institutions at the political and intellectual expense of Arabs.⁹

Jordan’s Islamist movement has recently shown clear liberal tendencies, despite internal debate about these values, and has announced its acceptance of democratic notions of pluralism, human rights, individual liberties and women’s rights.¹⁰ The credibility of the Islamist movement’s democratic and liberal political values is still in question, especially since a number of Islamist experiments have not borne out these intellectual stances – Hamas’ ongoing experiment in the Gaza Strip, Iran’s authoritarian rule, or the now-defunct Taliban regime in Afghanistan.¹¹

The Islamist movement remains conservative in social affairs, particularly regarding issues of religious reform and women in society. Recently, its public ideological and jurisprudential stances in this field have been Salafist – meaning regressive and based on the lifestyle of the first generation of Muslims – unlike its stances on political issues.¹² This is particularly true for the explicitly Salafist groups which are the other face of the Islamist movement besides the Muslim Brotherhood. The principal Salafist

nist Arab movements led them to more liberal stances. They began calling for democracy and political pluralism and announced their acceptance of human and civil rights, which are all integral components of liberalism. In the social sphere, most of the leftist and nationalist parties have called for modernity,

8 *Al-ahzab al-siyaasiyya al-udrunniyya bayna al-waqi’ wa al-tumoooh* [Jordanian Political Parties: Between Reality and Ambition] (Amman: Al-Quds Center for Political Studies, 2003), 31-54.

9 Private interview with the liberal Jordanian writer Batir Wardam.

10 See “The Vision of the Islamic Reform Movement,” Islamic Action Front, <http://www.jabha.net/aslah.ASP>.

11 Mohammed Abu Rumman, *Ghazat hamas naksa kabira lilislamiyyin* [Hamas’ Gaza a Major Setback for Islamists], *Al-Ghad*, August 27, 2007, <http://www.alghad.jo/?article=7034>.

12 On the Islamist movement’s stance towards modernity, women, and other issues: Mohammed Abu Rumman, “*Ma’rikat al-matbu’at wa al-nashr: mushkilat al-islamiyyin ma’ al-hadatha*” [“The ‘Printed Materials and Publishing’ Battle: Islamists’ Problem with Modernity!”], *Al-Ghad*, March 6, 2006, <http://www.alghad.jo/?article=5837>.

groups in Jordan are bifurcated in character: Traditionalist Salafism, which is politically pro-government, and Jihadist Salafism, which is hostile to the state and identifies with al-Qaida's ideology in its political rhetoric. Despite the rift between these influential Salafist movements, they stand united against sociopolitical and cultural modernity; they reject democracy and take a closed jurisprudential stance toward the issues of women's rights, human rights, individual liberties, and literary and cultural liberties.

Political Reform: Debate at Home and Abroad

Despite disagreements among Jordan's political movements concerning liberal values, there is a shared critique of what they consider a pro-U.S. Jordanian government. The nationalist, leftist and Islamist parties generally comprise a coalition of opposition parties hostile to U.S. foreign policy, which is the most notable point of contention between them and the Jordanian government.¹³ The stated posture of these parties is rejection of foreign, specifically American, intervention in internal government affairs. Yet these parties do not reject interaction with Western civil society institutions; they have working relationships with them, relying on foreign academic reports (e.g., from Human Rights Watch) to support their calls for political reform.¹⁴ It is important to note that the presence of even limited space for legal political reform, along with a strong hostility toward American influence, prompts politicians to favor political reform from within rather than turning to Western institutions.

Identifying with the Authorities

Here we must ask what the historical causes are that have contributed to the weakness of liberalism in Jordan. What would it take for the formation of an intellectual and political movement fully bearing the liberal standard in letter and spirit?

Historians suggest that there were certain moments in history that presented opportunities to establish a powerful liberal trend. Perhaps the most significant moment was during independence-era Jordan, during the 1940s and early '50s, when the country had clear liberal tendencies and was pushing for democracy and pluralism. This moment was exemplified by the 1951 Constitution, which in its various articles codified liberal values. The subsequent parliamentary elections confirmed the importance

13 On the Islamists' stance rejecting American calls for reform, see the study by Dr. Basem al-Towaissi entitled *Tahlil khitab al-sahafa al-urdunniyya tijah qadaya al-islah al-siyasi* [Analyzing the Jordanian Press's Discourse on Issues of Political Reform], an unpublished doctorate thesis, School of Media, Cairo University, 2006.

14 See the conference on "Political Reform in Jordan: International Partners' Role," Amman Center for Human Rights, <http://www.intekhabat.org/look/print.tpl?IdLanguage=17&IdPublication=1&NrArticle=3610&NrIssue=1&NrSection=6>.

of this historic opening, but regional intra-Arab conflicts and the Arab-Israeli conflict played major roles in subordinating this nascent liberal movement. Because Jordanian independence in 1946 coincided with the escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the rise of Arab nationalism and leftist movements, particularly Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser's massive campaign for Arab nationalism in the 1950s and '60s, the Jordanian regime prioritized its stability and security in an unfriendly regional environment ruled by revolutionary regimes enjoying good relations with the Soviet bloc. The broader surge of Arab nationalist and leftist ideology was reflected in the growth of corresponding political movements in Jordan. The groups' relationship with the Jordanian regime was fraught with tension, especially after a failed pro-Nasser coup attempt in 1958, which resulted in the banning of all political parties.

In the 1960s, leftist Palestinian organizations grew more popular than Arab nationalist organizations, gaining the support of Palestinian-Jordanians and Jordanian Arab nationalists. This decade also saw the rise of Islamist parties, due in large part to the crippling defeat of Nasserist Arab nationalists in 1967 and also due to the events of Black September in 1970 (fighting between the Jordanian army and Palestinian organizations).

“The majority of Jordan’s rural population, and a sizable portion of the Bedouin population, have reservations about genuine liberal reform.”

The 1970s ushered in the oil era, which profoundly affected Jordan, as many Jordanian students and workers in the Gulf were first exposed to Salafist ideology. Using its petrodollars, Saudi Arabia would later actively spread Salafism in the Middle East, while working to confront the Iranian Revolution and merging the conservative Gulf countries into the American strategy of containment against the Soviet Union. This was especially true after the invasion of Afghanistan opened the door for Salafist religious activity and its stance against

modernity. In other words, the Palestinian issue and regional circumstances played a major role in granting legitimacy and social space to the leftist, Arab nationalist and later Islamist movements, while the liberal elite suffered from negative association with Western policies. This proved a major obstacle to the liberal movement gaining popular traction. In these circumstances liberalism remained an individual inclination, and an elitist phenomenon.

Thus the leading historical factor in liberalism's failure to crystallize into a broader movement was the recognition by liberal elites that their interests aligned with those of the regime. Rather than staying at arm's length from the government, liberals joined a hybrid regime that was more a conservative autocracy than a liberal democracy. Lib-

erals relinquished their political and ideological independence, while also losing their legitimacy in the eyes of most Jordanians. Meanwhile, the leftists, Arab nationalists, and later the Islamists, were able to play the role of political opposition to the ruling regime and its policies, which granted them broad popular support.

The Social Makeup of Jordan as a Hindrance to Liberalism's Development

The inability of Jordanian liberalism to inspire a cohesive movement cannot be understood without examining the nature of Jordanian society. The majority of Jordan's rural population, and a sizable portion of the Bedouin population have reservations about genuine liberal reform because these groups have a vested interest in the stability of the Hashemite regime. Their close relationship dates back to Black September in 1970, when the state was able to assimilate a large percentage of the Bedouins and rural Jordanians by boosting government employment, which made these groups identify with the state and its policies to a large degree.

Native Jordanians tend toward political and social conservatism, as well as fear liberal economic reform. Considering that government employment levels are high among this group, a shift toward market reform involving more the private sector employment threatens entrenched interests in the form of this population's heavy reliance on government employment. Though the government does enjoy a patronage relationship with the rural population, this role has been in relative decline since the beginning of the 1990s, as privatization and economic reform have moved forward.

For the Palestinian-Jordanian population, which comprises roughly 40 percent of the population, the salience of the Palestinian issue and the general consensus that the United States and the Western liberal world are more sympathetic with Israel have strongly affected their views toward liberalism. A large segment of Palestinian-Jordanian society originally favored Palestinian leftist organizations but have recently been shifting toward Islamist ones.

While economic activity is still split between an inflated public sector and a weak private sector whose upper echelons are in a mutually beneficial alliance with the authorities, there have been signs of change since the 1990s. Privatization and economic reform have reduced the state's relative role and expanded private business. Politically, however, the private sector does not play an influential role. The internal economic cycle has witnessed neither tangible industrial development nor major increases in productivity. As a result, there has been no formation of a bourgeoisie class which would see liberalism as a means of protecting its interests against other players, as happened in Europe during the Industrial Revolution. The goals of Jordan's economic elite remain essentially limited to realizing financial gains and distancing themselves

from the traditional structure of Jordanian society, leaving economic development up to the constrained financial capabilities of the state and civil society.

Jordan's demography and internal political dimensions also limit the influence of liberal ideas in the social arena. Since Black September, there has been a clear-cut political and economic division between native Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians, comprising 55 percent and 40 percent of the population respectively. Native Jordanians regard demands for liberal reforms, both political and economic, as an attempt by the Palestinian-Jordanian elite to pull the rug out from under the feet of the native Jordanian elite and to strengthen the Palestinians' role in political decision-making. In response, native Jordanians within government institutions – the old guard – have firmly rejected political and economic liberal reform in order to protect Jordanian national identity and its main stronghold, the public sector. This factor has stymied the emergence of a powerful force pushing for liberal reform.¹⁵

Prerequisites to a Liberal Movement

Building an effective liberal movement in Jordan has certain prerequisites, first and foremost the creation of a complete, coherent political and ideological platform, building on the process of religious enlightenment, creating a social base to nurture liberal ideas, and engaging with political and cultural life. The misunderstanding of liberalism among the Jordanian public has led many to think that a “liberal” by definition seeks “liberation” from the bonds of religion, ethical values and social mores, yet accepts – or even promotes – subservience to the United States and the West. This stereotype has discouraged Jordanian society from accepting liberal ideas. Establishing a genuine, effective Jordanian liberal platform will require unequivocal liberal responses to the unanswered questions concerning the nature of liberalism, including its stance on political and economic reform, social and cultural issues, and its relationship with religion and the outside world.¹⁶ In addition, it is important to note that the vanguard of a liberal movement needs to be able to apply liberal ideas on the ground in Jordan, presenting them in a realistic, rational framework, taking into consideration the differences between theoretical conceptions and local implementation.

15 See an analysis of the mutual concerns held by the Jordanian and Palestinian elites in: Mostafa Hamarna and Khalil Shikaki, *Al-'alaqat al-urdunniyya – al-filastiniyya arba'a sinariyuhat lil-mustaqbal* [Jordanian-Palestinian Relations: Four Future Scenarios] (Amman: University of Jordan Center for Strategic Studies, 1997).

16 See Beshir Mosa Nafie, “The Crisis of the New Liberal Arab Rhetoric,” at Islam Online, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1179664500212&pagename=Zone-Arabic-ArtCulture%2FACALayout. Compare this with Mohammed Abu Rumman, “*Al-tariq ila al-libiraliya al-'arabiyya*” [“The Path to Arab Liberalism”], *Al-Ghad*, December 18, 2005, <http://www.alghad.jo/index.php?article=2859>.

A number of scholars argue that one of the preconditions for a serious liberal movement taking root in Arab society today is that it precede, or at least run parallel to, a process of religious reform that reinterprets religion such that it is not an obstacle to development, progress, and political and economic freedoms. Unfortunately, Jordanian liberals tend to ignore the importance of religious reform and its relationship

to society, either adopting a hostile stance toward religion, or completely disregarding it. In the end, Jordan lacks the Islamic intellectuals with the credentials to initiate much-needed religious reform and break the supposed contradiction between liberalism and religion. This absence of religious reform prevents liberalism from taking root in Jordan since religion plays such an important role in Jordanian society.

One of the main factors that enabled the enlightenment and political liberalism to triumph in Europe was the birth of a new industrial and economic class during the Industrial Revolution, which discovered that its vital interests could be realized with the support of liberal ideas. Without the formation of a real middle class, liberalism would never have become powerful enough to influence the social and political status quo. Even if Jordanian society is not yet prepared to embrace liberalism, there are still segments of society that can form the initial core of a liberal movement: the emerging private sector class, particularly the middle class and businessmen not allied with the government, as well as forces within Jordanian civil society that sincerely embrace true liberal values. ■

“Scholars argue that one of the preconditions for a serious liberal movement taking root in Arab society ... is that it precede, or at least run parallel to ... religious reform.”

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Armed and Dangerous Arms Proliferation Inside Yemen

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IF YOU EVER FIND YOURSELF sitting next to a Yemeni carrying a gun, don't be shocked or alarmed (that is, if you're in Yemen). In Yemen, carrying a firearm is a sign of prestige and masculinity; a gun is not merely a weapon, but an ornamental accoutrement and an integral part of the Yemeni identity. However, the number of men carrying firearms in Yemen has consistently pre-

sented a challenge to government efforts to protect its citizens. Since armed Yemeni tribesmen are part of the social fabric of the country, arms control presents the government with a sensitive social dilemma. In attempting to understand the reason for Yemeni small arms proliferation, it is important to consider Yemen's geopolitical environment. Attempts to curb arms sales in Yemen are hindered by its location, neighboring the Horn of Africa, which is considered a center of unrest and armed conflicts and a major source of the arms proliferation in the area. Yemen also supplies arms to the Horn of Africa including the countries of Djibouti, Somalia and Sudan. The arms trade benefits the Yemeni armed services because licensed importers give one-third of their arms shipments to the Yemeni Ministry of Defense, in addition to regular taxes levied on the sale of arms. In light of all these conditions, crackdowns on arms ownership are extremely difficult.

“In Yemen, carrying a firearm is a sign of prestige and masculinity ... an ornamental accoutrement and an integral part of the Yemeni identity.”

Recent popular opposition to, and international condemnation of the widespread availability of firearms in Yemen has been on the rise. While local voices have expressed opposition to prolific firearms possession, international objections have been the most influential. In efforts to expose this problem, international media outlets have reported that Saudi weapons are being smuggled across the Saudi-Yemeni border. Such reports have brought the attention of the international community to Yemen's countless firearms, and the United States as well as the European Union have expressed great concern. The Yemeni government has acknowledged that the spread of weapons is detrimental to the country and its interests, especially since small arms, primarily owned by Yemeni tribes and citizens, have been used against Western targets in Yemen. In May 2007, humanitarian aid workers were caught in heavy gunfire in Sa'ada, and in 2002 a confrontation between the Obeida tribe and the Yemeni Forces resulted from an attempt to shoot down a helicopter owned by Hunt Oil, a U.S. oil company, in the Beni Harith region.

The Number of Firearms in Yemen

Estimates of the number of small arms in Yemen vary, ranging from the exaggerated but oft-repeated figure of 50 million, to the more conservative estimate of 4 or 5 million. Derek Miller, program manager of the UN Institute for Disarmament Research, reports that there are between 6 to 9 million small arms in Yemen, noting that, "this figure represents only 10-20 percent of the mythical estimate of over 50 million small arms."¹ In his analysis of the arms trade, Miller points out that Yemen is not the source of most small weapons, but rather most are from Eastern and Western European countries, China, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa and the Philippines.² However, Yemen does export arms to countries in the Horn of Africa, namely Djibouti, Somalia and Sudan. Miller's study states that most small arms "are imported legally from the countries that were referred to previously."³ In a statistical study that took into consideration the population of Yemen, along with those allowed to own arms and the army reserve, the approximate number of arms in Yemen should not exceed 7.3 million pieces (i.e., four small arms per person).⁴ Miller also concluded that in 2001, tribes held 5,577,597 arms; sheikhs held 184,000; markets held 30,000, and the Yemeni state held 1,500,000.⁵ This study shows that Yemen is on the top of the shortlist

1 Derek Miller, "Demand Stockpiles and Social Controls: Small Arms in Yemen," *Small Arms Survey Occasional Paper #9*, May 2003, 28.

2 Derek Miller, "Demand," op cit, 45.

3 Ibid.

4 http://alasaha-yemen.net/view_news.asp?sub_no=1_2007_08_10_57894.

5 Derek Miller, "Demand," op cit, 28.

of countries where small arms are present. The United States still ranks first on the list with 84 guns per 100 people.⁶

Since the demand for small weapons in Yemen is proportional to the population, demand for small arms imports per year was 200,000 pieces in 2006.⁷ In addition to the number of arms in Yemen, gun prices have also been on the rise. Recently, the price of

some models of Kalashnikovs has increased from \$200 to \$600. Ironically, the higher price is attributed to a government buyback program targeting armed citizens in the tribal regions, especially those in Maareb, El Joof, Shabwaah, and those regions that have been a threat to national security (oil production and foreign investment centers). The government has earmarked millions of Yemeni riyals in the last two years specifically for this purpose, despite the perverse effect the effort has had on prices.

“Estimates of the number of small arms in Yemen vary, ranging from the exaggerated but oft-repeated figure of 50 million, to the more conservative estimate of 4 or 5 million.”

Yemen Becomes an Armed Society

The proliferation of small arms use among Yemeni citizens can be traced back to the Ottoman invasion, when civilians used and amassed rifles as tools of resistance against their Ottoman invaders. From this, the Yemeni tradition of carrying a weapon as part of a national identity was born. Arms have become much more than a means of self-defense; they are also a decorative item and status symbol for Yemeni men. Arms were further tied to a sense of identity and virility during the 1962 revolution in northern and northeast Yemen. Since the revolution, about 20 percent of the population, especially in the border regions, has owned small arms, most of them inherited or seized after the revolution. Until recently, Yemenis favored small arms, particularly Kalashnikovs, for personal safety. With time, however, there has been an escalation in the type and quantity of arms that citizens own and operate, with many now owning medium to heavy arms. While originally kept for status and defensive purposes, this large quantity and variety of firearms available in Yemen is now being used to commit acts of violence. While there is a precedent for the use of firearms to settle tribal conflicts in Yemen, this steady increase in the number and quantity of medium and large arms worries some experts who suggest that this increase in arms proliferation

6 Derek Miller, “Living with Weapons: Small Arms in Yemen,” *Small Arms Survey 2003* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2003), 169.

7 *Ibid.*, 177.

will lead to a greater culture of violence, including organized crime. As of yet however, firearms have not reportedly been used in Yemeni organized crime.

The Government's Efforts

The government has undertaken a number of efforts to control medium and heavy arms possession in Yemen. However, some of these efforts, such as using government funds to the tune of 6 billion Yemeni riyals (\$33 million) to buy arms from the citizens and store them in government owned warehouses have had limited success and may actually have further fueled proliferation by creating incentives to buy and sell weapons.⁸ The Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior Affairs then displayed the contents of those warehouses as part of a greater arms control campaign. Among the arms on display were thousands of medium and heavy arms, including anti-aircraft missiles, tanks, mortar canons, ammunitions for two Surface-to-Air (SAM) missiles, materials for explosive devices, Howitzer fillings, tank missiles, bazookas and anti-armor rounds, rocket-propelled grenades, and significant numbers of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. These efforts coincided with government initiatives to build

“In the past three years, 24,632 incidents were caused by the use of firearms, including 5,000 deaths and 18,500 injuries.”

a safe environment in Yemen in order to attract more foreign and Arab investment, following the success of the Funders' Conference in London in November 2007 and the Investment Opportunities Conference held last April.

The Yemeni state issued the “Law Controlling Possession and Trade of Firearms and Ammunitions” in May 1992. This law was criticized by a number of government officials and the ruling party newspaper because it gave the right to buy arms without an official permit and did not address ownership, only possession. It also does not enable the police force to stop citizens from misusing arms. Overall, the law legitimized the status quo, rather than controlling the spread of arms in Yemen. Problems also surfaced in the implementation of this law because the government has enforced it selectively; elites were shielded from the law, while others had to comply. The lack of consistent enforcement tarnished the law's reputation even though the most citizens agreed with the law's content.⁹

8 <http://www.alwasat-ye.net>.

9 <http://www.rezgar.com/debat/show.art.asp?aid=110342>.

More recently, in 2006, the ruling party revived a draft law that would obligate citizens to register their weapons with authorities and only allow those citizens with official permits issued by the police to carry their weapons in public. The law had been previously blocked by Sheikh Abdulla al-Ahmar, head of the parliament and an opponent of the law. The law was discussed in parliament, accepted for inclusion in the parliament's agenda by the absolute majority, and then sent to the parliament's Committee for Defense and Security for further analysis and preparation of a report detailing remarks that would enable the police to confiscate any unlicensed arms found. However, parliament has yet to discuss the draft law.

Yet despite recent government efforts at arms control, the long-standing corruption, weakness, and disregard for the rule of law by the government have predictably led to arms proliferation, as Yemeni citizens take security into their own hands. Government weakness has also enabled arms to be leaked from the government military camps and stockpiles.

Those Harmed by Firearms in Yemen

A recent report by Yemen's Ministry of Interior reaffirmed that the spread of arms directly correlates to the number of crimes and accidents in the country. The report noted that in the past three years, 24,632 incidents were caused by the use of firearms, including 5,000 deaths and 18,500 injuries.¹⁰ The report also highlighted that the Ministry of Interior had recently begun to implement several measures to control the spread of arms in Yemen. The first was to place security forces in all governorates. Second, the Ministry increased patrols and checkpoints in the capital and cities. Third, it banned citizens from carrying arms in big cities, including the capital, Sanaa. Additionally, the Ministry undertook the buyback plan, and coordination with armed forces to prevent military officers and personnel from carrying weapons off duty. The Ministry hopes that these measures will not only protect Yemenis, but also boost tourism and investment.¹¹

The report added that during the last three years, security authorities confiscated 13,106 machine guns, 3,115 handguns, 251 bombs, 204 other weapons, as well as explosives, gun powder and fire works. Additionally, in the governorate of Zamar the number of murders reported was 61, of which 43 were by firearms. The governorate of Omran had the second highest crime rate with 46 crimes, of which 29 involved firearms. The governorate of Ab was third with 40 crimes, 22 of which involved firearms.

10 "Yemen: Moves Afoot to Reduce Number of Firearms in Cities," *Integrated Regional Information Networks*, United Nations, September 21, 2007, <http://www.worldpress.org/Mideast/2937.cfm>.

11 Ibid.

Following these governorates was al-Assema with 39 crimes, Ta'ez with 37, Sanaa with 33, Sa'ada with 30, Haja 29, Baydaa 30, Lahag 17, Shabwa 17, Hodayda 15, Maareb 15, Joof 14, El Mahweet 13, Adan 10, Mohra six, Hadramout six, Abeen five, and four in Reema.

U.S. and Saudi Concerns About Arms in Yemen

The United States and Saudi Arabia have expressed concerns about arms smuggling to terrorists through the Yemeni borders with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. This concern has motivated the United States and Saudi Arabia to finance a campaign amounting to 500 million Yemeni riyals to buy weapons from the Yemeni souks to take the arms off the market. Some journalists reported that the main motive behind projects dealing with the purchase of weapons from local markets is to attract foreign aid to the government.

The publication "Views on the Gulf," published by the Center for Gulf Studies in Dubai, reported that during the period from Feb. 22, 2004 to Feb. 9, 2005, the Saudi Authorities confiscated 599 Kalashnikovs, 39 rifles, eight machine guns, 41 hunting guns, 170 mortar guns and mortar canons, 30 mortar missiles, and 140 small rifles in the Najran, A'aseer and Gizan regions. By comparison, the Yemeni army is equipped with approximately 1,500,000 pieces. The report also noted that the price of weapons in Yemen is still much cheaper than in their countries of origin, suggesting that Saudi Arabia and the United States have not succeeded in curbing the supply of arms to Yemen. Even though there has been progress in security relations between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, there are factors that make the success of such projects difficult. These factors include the difficulty of monitoring the traffic along the Yemeni-Saudi border, the customs and traditions in the border area, and the weakness of the Yemeni economy and the political structure.¹²

Protesting Rise in Gun Violence

In this heavily armed culture, filled with gratuitous gun deaths, there have been citizen voices that have risen up in protest, calling on the government to take greater and more meaningful steps to curb arms proliferation. On occasion there have been protests, carried out by civil society groups, intellectuals, journalists and political figures – even children from the Children's Parliament – demanding that the government expedite the law's passage, which has been put on hold since the government sent it to parliament many years ago. The protestors carry different slogans against arms such

12 <http://www.newsyemen.net>.

as: “Yemen free from arms, Yemen free of passion crimes and death,” “Let’s make Yemen a land free of arms,” “Our Yemen is beautiful without arms.” In a similar effort, nurses took to the streets in an anti-gun demonstration, protesting the rising crime rate.¹³ While the demand for arms increases on an annual basis, government efforts, the help and pressure of the international community, and a growing awareness and frustration about the danger of arms proliferation among the Yemeni community may lead to real and lasting reforms. ■

13 “Yemeni Nurses Hold Anti-Gun Demonstration,” *Associated Press*, September 9, 2005.

Arab Funnies Get Serious Arab Cartoons Bash America

BISSAN EDWAN

Researcher, Arabs Against Discrimination - Cairo; Palestinian Territories

Early Years of Arab Caricature

Cartoon, the more narrative structure of a caricature, can be as simple as a line drawing paired with a facetious comment. A message from the artist to the recipient, it evokes a shared cultural and social context, and ideally it leaves the viewer with a smile, while forcing him or her to reflect on the subtext matter. Political caricature aims to achieve goals ranging from criticizing the local or international political status quo to incitement and social upheaval. Arab political cartoons, which serve some of the same social and political functions as cartoons elsewhere, first arose as an outlet to relieve the pressures of colonialism, political despotism and poverty. Bereft of conventional outlets for commentary, cartoons provided a safe but effective medium for expression.

While cartooning in the Arab world dates back to the Pharaonic age, with notable vestiges still visible in the Valley of the Kings, modern political caricature arrived with the advent of print media. Arab caricature and cartoons have their origins in the 19th century, particularly with the emergence of the satirical publication *Abu Nadara*, first issued by the father of Egyptian cartoon and theater, Yaqoub Sanoua, in Egypt in 1878. Interest in cartoons grew during the 1920s, and the first politically motivated cartoons appeared in the 1930s. Coinciding with this Egyptian development, caricature spread to the Levant, North Africa and the Gulf, becoming an integral part of both government-sponsored and independent Arab media.

Political Use of Caricature in the Arab World

Political and editorial cartoons are some of the most prominent features of Arabic-language daily newspapers, and tend to reflect the political environment and the predominant Arab political discourse of the day. They either aspire to critique the dominant political paradigm, generally giving voice to the political orientation of the artist or newspaper, or in the case of state-owned or pro-government papers, seek to generate support for government policy.

The British occupation of Egypt saw the emergence of many nationalist cartoonists, such as Reda, who was affectionately referred to as “Big Uncle,” and the famous caricaturist Abdel Sameea, who contributed to the burgeoning nationalist movement by publishing a book of black-and-white sketches calling for national liberation. With the Arab world facing political and social turmoil at the end of the 1940s, particularly stemming from the expulsion of the Palestinian people in 1948, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the growth of pan-Arabism came to the fore of the daily affairs of the Arab people. These developments were reflected in various Arab art forms, including caricature, which matured from an often-trivial source of amusement to a more serious medium, participating in the struggle against foreign involvement in Palestine, and the Arab world at large.

During the 1950s and 60s, a generation of socially conscious Arab political cartoonists from a variety of countries appeared. These included Salah Jaheen, George Bahgouri and Baghat Othman in Egypt; Najy al-Alie in Palestine; Ghazi in Iraq, Abdel Latif Madeni, Samir Kahala and Ali Farazat in Syria; Mohammed Zawawwi in Libya; and Khalil al-Ashkar in Lebanon. Each of these artists changed the face of Arab caricature, creating characters through which they expressed their political and social views, criticized despotism and imperialism, and called for reform and freedom. Moreover, with the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War, artists began paying more attention to matters of national interest, and exploring the causes of the crushing defeat inflicted by Israel. While cartoons in the early second half of the 20th century had focused on the Palestinian cause, the Arab-Israeli conflict and pan-Arabism, national issues steadily had grown more prominent from this defeat by the 1970s.

Changing Portrayals of America

Throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the United States was rarely featured in Arab political cartoons, and did not have a visible presence during the first decades of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Some Arab cartoonists at the time adopted the stereotypical image of the United States popularized by the German-American artist Thomas Nast a century before – an Uncle Sam with an Abraham Lincoln beard, a serious expression and an American flag-patterned costume.

During the 1980s, as the American role in the Arab-Israeli conflict expanded, and the country's impact on regional politics became increasingly apparent, the Arab political cartoons began to incorporate U.S. stand-ins much more prominently. During the Reagan administration, the president took the place of Uncle Sam as the embodiment of America and its pro-Israeli policies in Arab cartoons. Throughout this period, the United States was almost never portrayed without an Israeli figure present somewhere in the picture.

The 1990s reshaped Arab political cartoons' portrayal of America, especially after the U.S.-led war against Iraq in 1991. In turn, political cartoons played a vital role in forming the new image of the United States accepted by the Arab people. For perhaps the first time, the United States and its interventionist policies in the region were alone at the forefront of Arab political cartoons.

New symbols were employed to depict the United States' presence in the region, including American soldiers and military equipment, as well as Uncle Sam, the U.S. president, and the American flag. By drawing Uncle Sam with forceful contours and stern features, America was increasingly portrayed as a hegemonic power in the Arab world.

With the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union, the United States' increasingly prominent role on the world stage was perceived in a negative light by the Arab public, as reflected in the unsavory depictions of America in Arab political cartoons at the time. As the United States assumed a leadership role in the peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the portrayal of America in Arab political cartoons began to change, though not for the better: In cartoons from this time, America was depicted as the primary agent of globalization, supporting multinational corporations, dominating the United Nations (UN), and as a hypocrite with double standards in managing international conflicts. To highlight America's role in globalization, political cartoonists introduced new symbols for America, reflective of its market-oriented culture, such as the hamburger and Coca-Cola.

The United States' response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 drew new attention to old Arab grievances regarding the United States' seemingly unmitigated support for Israel, and perceived hegemonic control over the Middle East and related UN Security Council resolutions; these grievances have been reflected in Arab political cartoons. In addition, U.S. democracy promotion efforts in the years after the at-

“America was depicted as the primary agent of globalization, supporting multinational corporations, dominating the UN, and as a hypocrite with double standards.”

tacks raised new concerns about American interventionism in the Arab world. These concerns led to an outpouring of highly critical political cartoons.

Given the importance of this historic moment, representative samples of Arab political cartoons, which are representative of a general trend, merit closer scrutiny.

Images of the United States in Arab Political Cartoons Post-Sept. 11

1. Many post-Sept. 11 Arab political cartoons continued to focus on American support for Israel, both at the UN and regional level. In a piece by the Egyptian artist Gomaa, a man representing international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is depicted clutching a sheet of paper proclaiming “Zionism = Racism.” In the background, there is a sign for Durban, referencing the UN-organized World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, which was held in Durban, South Africa in 2001. At the conference, NGOs refused to issue

a resolution equating Zionism with racism. The dominant NGO figure dwarfs the UN secretary-general, who appears in the cartoon dressed like Uncle Sam, and ready to write down American orders. The secretary-general is portrayed as tiny and insignificant, literally in America’s outstretched palm, an allusion to the UN’s weakness and compliance with American instructions to change the draft resolution.



The war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 also provided an opportunity for cartoonists to reaffirm American support for Israel. The Egyptian cartoonist Mustafa Hussein in the Egyptian newspaper *Akhbar Al-Yaum* portrays Uncle Sam looming over the other characters, and standing behind Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. In the cartoon, Olmert demands American protection from a bedraggled Lebanon, represented by a man in traditional Lebanese garb. A cluster of human skulls also appears in the cartoon, while Olmert’s left hand is drenched in blood. This particular cartoon shows that Uncle Sam still has currency as a symbol of America. Despite the changing means of representing the United



Gomaa, www.cartoon.com, 2002.

Mustafa Hussein, *Akhbar al-Yawn*, (Cairo Egypt) July 18, 2006.

States, Uncle Sam remains the first symbol to spring to the Arab cartoonist's mind.

Some cartoons have gone further and linked American rhetoric on reform in the Middle East to Israeli interests. In an editorial cartoon by Syrian Akram Raslan published on Nov. 13, 2005, in the Saudi online paper, *Alyaum*, Uncle Sam delivers a lecture on democracy to an elderly Arab – an allusion to Arab weakness and impotence. Uncle Sam, meanwhile, is leaning against and chained to, an Israeli weight. The artist used modified symbols to represent American Middle East policy; Uncle Sam is noticeably stouter than usual, as well as beardless and in nontraditional clothing, but still wearing his trademark hat.



2. This period also saw a surge in coverage of American domestic politics in an attempt to draw attention to Arab disapproval of the American political system, and its implications for Middle East policy. A sketch by the Egyptian artist Bedaiwi recreates, on his popular website, the infamous moment just before the second World Trade Center tower was hit by a terrorist-hijacked jetliner, but reflects a conspiracy theory, popular in the Arab world, that the U.S. government was responsible for the attacks. With smoke pouring out of the North Tower, a plane labeled “CIA” is poised to crash into the South Tower. This cartoon reflects one of the conspiracy theories put forth after Sept. 11, suggesting that factions within the U.S. government carried out the attacks, an interpretation which is accepted by many people in the Arab world.

The Jordanian cartoonist Naser al-Jaafari draws a comparison between World War I and the war in Iraq. Al-Jaafari divides his cartoon into two panels, each depicting the American method of mobilizing the American public. In the first panel (reading right to left), there is the famous WWI recruiting poster of Uncle Sam, pointing at the reader and saying “I want YOU for U.S. Army.” In the satirical second panel, Uncle Sam is recruiting soldiers for the Iraq war with the phrase “I want YOU to die in Iraq.”

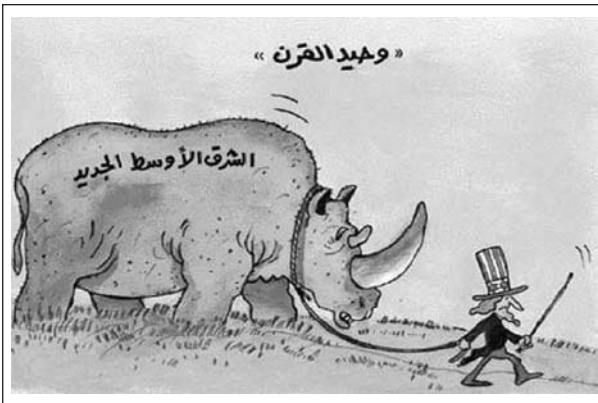
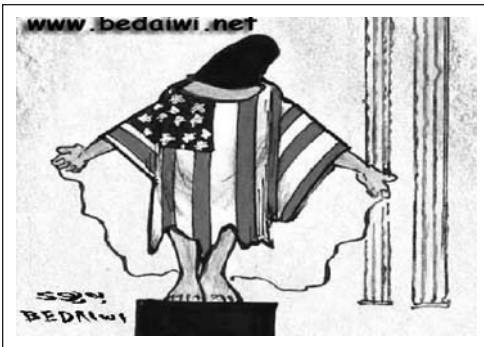
In another political cartoon by al-Jaafari, he targets Bush's plummeting popularity, attributing it to his frequent vacations. The president is shown relaxing in swimming



Clockwise: Naser al-Jaafari, *Al-Rai*, (Jordan); Bedaiwi, arabcartoon.net; al-Jaafari, 2001; al-Jafaari, *Al-Rai*, 2005.

trunks and a cowboy hat, reclining on an American soldier’s coffin, seemingly undisturbed by the bad news in the newspaper beside him. Furthermore, the scene is set in the desert, perhaps Bush’s native Texas, but perhaps suggesting that Bush is diverting himself with Middle Eastern policies while ignoring domestic affairs.

3. Arab political cartoonists naturally show great interest in the American war in Iraq and its repercussions. Bedaiwi, for instance, likened the situation of the average Iraqi under Saddam Hussein, to his position under the American occupation, but the latter is depicted as more ruthless: in the right panel, despite Saddam’s repression, the frail Iraqi remains alive and relatively upright. In the left panel however, the Iraqi is completely crushed by an American army boot. Thus, the cartoon suggests a clear difference between pre- and post-war Iraq for average Iraqis. This cartoon employs new



Clockwise: Bedaiwi, www.arabcartoon.net; Naser al-Jaafari, *Al-Rai*, Feb. 16, 2006; Mustafa Hussein, *Akhbar al-Yawn*, July 31, 2006; Suleiman al-Malik, *Al-Watan* (Qatar), July 31, 2006.

symbols and is more literal about the negative impact of U.S. policy than other cartoons. In the second cartoon, Naser al-Jaafari shows American troops sinking deeper into the quagmire, with a sign in the background pointing toward “new Vietnam.”

4. A large number of post-Sept. 11 cartoons also focused on the contradictions in America’s human rights and reform rhetoric. These cartoons employed symbols in new ways; whereas the American flag had been used only to denote U.S. affiliation, here the flag is incorporated into the symbolism of the cartoon itself. Bedaiwi, for example, recreates a notorious image of Abu Ghraib torture, replacing the prisoner’s shroud with an American flag, suggesting a gap between U.S. rhetoric and practices regarding torture. In another example, al-Jaafari goes even further, turning the stripes on the American flag into bars, with a tortured prisoner crucified upon them.

Like human rights violations, U.S. statements about creating a “new Middle East” are consistently panned by Arab cartoonists. Clearly evoking Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s talk about the birth of a new Middle East during the war in Lebanon

in the summer of 2006, the Egyptian cartoonist Mustafa Hussein drew then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in bed with an American flag pulled over him; taking a phone call from Rice, Annan tells her, “I’m no good at births ... what you need is a midwife.” The Qatari cartoonist Suleiman al-Malik emphasizes the difficulty of reshaping the region, showing Uncle Sam trying to tame an enormous rhinoceros labeled “the new Middle East.”

5. Arab political cartoonists jumped on the war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 as a chance to re-emphasize what they consider unquestioning American support for Israel. Many of these cartoonists believe that the United States and Israel are mutually dependent, and that U.S. support for Israel during the conflict was in fact an American proxy war on Iran. For example, in one cartoon, Mustafa Hussein depicts Uncle Sam as a kangaroo with Israel in its pouch, and the Star of David on its hat, encouraging a craven, Israeli stand-in as he attacks Lebanon. With a backdrop of human skulls, Hussein references what he sees as the destruction wrought upon Lebanon through direct American military assistance to Israel.

In another example, the Saudi artist Alaa’ al-Luqta blames the deaths of Lebanese civilians in Qena on the United States. A Lebanese man carries the body of a child, with the caption reading, “this program was brought to you by the United States of America.”

A cartoon in the Qatar newspaper *Al-Watan* depicted the war by drawing the Statue of Liberty, her crown studded with Israeli missiles, implicitly crying at the damage done to American values by U.S. support for Israel in the 2006 conflict. An editorial cartoon in an independent Saudi newspaper uses the image of an apple to represent Lebanon, which is held



Mustafa Hussein, *Al-Gomhouria*, August 9, 2006.
Alaa’ al-Luqta, *Al-Madina* (Saudi Arabia) July, 31, 2006.

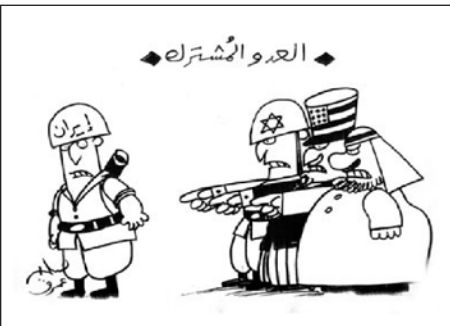


out by the U.S.-controlled UN for an Israeli worm to eat.

Some cartoons depicting U.S. foreign policy malfeasance put the United States and Israel in league with Arab states. Amr Salim of the Egyptian *Al-Gomhouria* depicts the United States, Israel and the Persian Gulf countries pointing to Iran, labeled above as “the common enemy.”



From large government dailies to opposition-run independent papers, and from the Arabian Gulf to Morocco, the majority of the Arab media depicts the United States negatively using cartoons and caricatures. This negative perception of the United States and its foreign policy stems from deeply held Arab mistrust of U.S. intentions. But these images do more than reflect Arab perceptions of the United States: through the whimsical, and oftentimes playful media of cartoon, this mistrust has permeated the daily lives of Arabs all the more deeply. ■



Al-Watan, August 12, 2006 (Qatar).

Al-Watan, August 8, 2006 (Saudi Arabia).

Amr Salim, *Al-Gomhouria*, August 7, 2006.

Syria's Crisis of Expression

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THE TOTALITARIAN NATURE of Syria's oppressive autocracy has all but eliminated even the most basic human freedoms. Under the harsh conditions of martial law, the Syrian press struggles for its survival attempting to comply with arbitrary laws that leave reporters at the mercy of the state. The absence of freedom of speech stems from the pervasive notion that the needs of the state supersede individual freedoms, with democratic rights only considered secondary or marginal issues. Even placing the authoritarian language of repression and narrow-minded interests aside, this focus on state power leads to a distorted and arrested culture and society. This essay will offer a portrait of Syria's autocratic regime, the legislation and reforms it has enacted to garner tight control over its citizens, and its impact on the freedom of expression in Syria's media.

Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Syria: A Historical Crisis

While the Syrian Constitution theoretically guarantees certain rights and freedoms, including some protections of speech, it assigns the regulation of these various rights to subsequent supplementary laws. At the forefront of these laws is the emergency law – a system of martial law giving government agencies sweeping powers that undercut human rights guarantees, allowing arbitrary detention and arrest of suspects deemed a threat to public security, all without any warrant or specific legal basis. The law permits the unrestricted monitoring and searching of people and places, and allows the

“With Syria under martial law for more than four decades, freedom of expression in the country has constantly been subordinate to the will of the executive.”

criminalization of acts without vetted and legally developed legislation.

With Syria under martial law for more than four decades, freedom of expression in the country has constantly been subordinate to the will of the executive. After announcing a state of emergency in 1963, the Baath party regime quickly declared martial law.¹ The government shuttered all newspapers and magazines, abrogating Press

Law 35/1946, which had been in effect since Syria’s independence in 1946. The martial decree also banned the licensing of any newspaper or magazine, confiscated all printing equipment, and seized the movable and immovable assets of printing house owners.²

From Martial Law to “Martialized” Laws

Despite moves in the past few years to reduce the role of martial law in public life, the changes have been limited, leaving much of the security-oriented mentality and old methods in place. This mentality has created a mechanism to preserve the essence of emergency law within public life, in a process which a Syrian human rights lawyer labeled “the martialization of the laws,” implying a process whereby the normal legal code is reshaped to reflect the spirit of austerity imposed by martial law.

The notion of “martialized” legality allows one to understand the Syrian press law, issued in September 2001 by Legislative Decree 50/2001. It is less a coherent press law than a list of severe punishments to be imposed on anyone exercising free speech. A journalist, wishing to remain anonymous, described the law as having been “written in a police station.” The press law tightens the legal restrictions on form of expression, and cripples writers with new lists of forbidden activities. The draconian law allows the government to manipulate every detail presented in the media.³

The Syrian press law and its supplementary laws are, unsurprisingly, tailored to the interests of the ruling elite. Moreover, this series of laws disregards the principles of the Syrian Constitution, and of international human rights conventions. Among

1 “Syrian Arab Republic Public Administration Country Profile,” Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, September 2004, 2, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UN/UNPAN023183.pdf>.

2 Moh’id Anjarini, “Oppressive Laws in Syria: Laws of Emergency issued upon the Legislative Act No. 15 on 22.12.1962 by the Council of Ministers in Syria,” *Justice Online Journal*, October 2001, <http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d4/354.aspx>.

3 “Decree No. 50/2001: Human Rights Concerns,” Human Rights Watch, January 31, 2002, <http://hrw.org/backgrounder/mena/syria>.

the most important restrictions are the continuation of state ownership of most media outlets, strict censorship of private media, and a list of subjects or lines of inquiry that are forbidden to be discussed in the media. These limitations do not merely restrict an otherwise effective press; rather they subsume the essence of journalism and its critical role in a free society. The laws also restrict print media, applying precise, sometimes bizarre censorship on all books, newspapers and publications from abroad. There are numerous examples of this law's application in Syria, such as the closure of the neophyte newspaper *Al-Domari*,⁴ as well as the continued strict censorship of the pro-government National Progressive Front's papers. Meanwhile, the government has also cracked down on dialogue forums, closing most of them down, and reducing the space for other cultural activities through the harsh censorship of various cultural productions like poetry and novels.

Nationalization of most media outlets is perhaps the most egregious aspect of the press law. Though the law allows for the production of some private newspapers, article 129, clause 9 of the law allows the prime minister to accept or reject applications for print media permits for reasons related to the "public interest," a broad clause that the prime minister has the sole authority to interpret. Those requesting a permit, meanwhile, have neither the right to appeal the prime minister's decision, nor the ability to reapply for a permit within one year.⁵ Interestingly, these permits are required only for print media; the law makes no mention of radio and television stations, meaning that the government is determined to avoid even discussing legalizing private ownership of the latter.

The Syrian press law has also effectively prolonged – and perhaps even toughened – the state of emergency through harsh, broad punishments based on vague guidelines. The law raised the maximum jail time for publications violations from one to three years, and raised maximum fines to 1,000,000 liras (approximately \$21,500).⁶ The press law also put a stringent system of censorship in place for newspapers, mandating that they submit all printed material for approval before they can be published. Yet even absent this censorship, the law ensures that journalists will not contradict the government's view by threatening criminal charges for a host of vaguely defined

4 *Al-Domari* was a privately-owned satirical weekly launched in February 2001. In April 2003, the paper ceased printing under government pressure, resuming in July of the same year. After having to distribute issues on their own since the state-run distributor refused to do so, the staff received notice that the Syrian government cancelled its newspaper license on July 31, 2003. "Syria: Government Revokes Private Weekly's License," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, August 5, 2003, <http://www.cpj.org/news/2003/Syria05aug03na.html>.

5 Akram Al Bunni, "The Syrian Press: Between the State of Emergency and the New Press Law," *Arab Press Freedom Watch*, May 2004, 4. <http://www.apfw.org/data/annualconference/2004/english/papers/Syria04AkramAl-BunniEn.pdf>.

6 "Decree No. 50/2001," *op cit*.

offenses such as, printing items that are allegedly untrue, that infringe on national security or unity, inflict damage to the economy and currency, disparage the prestige of the state and infringe on its dignity.⁷

It is not difficult to imagine how the Syrian government employs certain articles of the press law to erode journalists' rights; take, for example, article 29, clause 5, which bans the publishing of articles "infringing on national security and society's unity," or articles 50 and 51, which impose harsh sanctions on anyone who opposes "public morality" or "creates unrest."⁸ Anyone convicted of publishing untrue news can be sentenced to one to three years in prison, with fines of 500,000 to 1,000,000 liras (approximately \$10,750 to \$21,500). These articles stipulate that both maximum punishments will be imposed if the item was published out of ill intent, caused public unrest, soured international relations, disparaged the prestige of the state or infringed on its dignity, infringed on national unity, infringed on the morale of the army and armed forces, or inflicted damage on the economy and currency. These vagaries allow the government to cast a wide net over journalists and publications.

The government also uses provisions of the press law to prevent journalists from writing about politics. Paragraph 4 of article 44, for instance, bans non-political publications from publishing political topics. Since politics is difficult, if not impossible, to extricate from any discussion of economics, philosophy, and religion, among other topics, the government uses this as another potential weapon against publications it may wish to shut down. Article 22, paragraph 3, meanwhile, can be used to close down a newspaper if it is proven that the newspaper received money from foreign parties in exchange for propaganda or favorable coverage, or if two criminal rulings are issued against the newspaper – without the clause specifying any further details on the two criminal rulings.⁹ Ironically, earlier Press Law 35/1946 had required five separate criminal rulings before a publication was shut down, but even that was a controversial measure in the late 1940s. At the time, some rejected the idea that a publication be closed in addition to bearing the burden of the criminal rulings. Others proposed increasing the number of rulings necessary for a paper to be closed, and requiring that the offenses at issue be felonies truly affecting national security, not misdemeanors based on technicalities.

In addition to the press law, Decree 58/1974 established the Journalists' Syndicate, which obliges its members to work for its objectives, particularly regarding the struggle to achieve the goals of the Baath Party. The decree also allows for the dismissal

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

of journalists who “shook the trust of the people,” “aroused instincts conflicting with society’s interests,” or “portrayed reality dishonestly.” Once again, vague, undefined terms facilitate the persecution of journalists. Thus, the Journalists’ Syndicate, which in theory should work for the journalists’ interest, is actually another tool of state repression. Making matters even worse, the employment and promotion of journalists are based primarily on obedience, not competence, which has forced dozens of competent journalists out of the profession.

Another law established the Syrian Arab Institution for the Distribution of Printed Materials, passed by legislative decree in 1975. The law gives this institution the sole right to distribute all printed materials and bans any newspaper or publication from undertaking distribution. To guarantee that the distribution process goes as government officials want, the institution’s board was formed to ensure government and ruling party control. The board includes the Assistant Minister of Information, delegates from the Ministry of Culture, the Writers’ Union and the Journalists’ Syndicate, as well as an expert appointed by the Minister of Information. This institution is endowed with far-reaching powers, such as the sole right to determine the number of copies printed of each and every publication; an exemption from returning the printed copies to the source; and the power to deny the owner of the publication the right to monitor sales.

Furthermore, the Syndicate can unilaterally determine what percentage of the sales revenue it will claim in compensation for distribution – up to 30 percent, with the publication owner allowed no say in the matter. For example, the institution obliged *Al-Domari* – before its closure by the government in 2003 – to distribute only 14,000 copies, though it had been distributing about 40,000 copies regularly. Undoubtedly, these legal rights and privileges that the institution possesses constitute an effective tool to economically suppress the press.

Further adding to the list of restrictions are the decisions made by Baath Party congresses, which supplement the existing legislation’s grip over the media. The Baath Party’s 5th congress in 1971 established the principle of a centralized media. The party went on to monopolize all media institutions – Al-Wehda for Journalism and Publishing, Dar Al-Baath for Journalism and Publishing, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), the Tishreen Foundation for Journalism and Publishing, the Media Preparation Institute, and the General Organization of Radio and Television – and run them

“[The Syrian Press] law raised the maximum jail time for publications violations from one to three years, and raised maximum fines to 1,000,000 liras (approximately \$21,500).”

centrally, with the goal of nearly absolute control over the media. In light of all these conditions, it is clear that there is no such thing as journalism in Syria; rather only a cabal of government newspapers and magazines, either centralized or heavily censored, aimed at a range of target audiences to ensure that the party's message reaches every segment of society. Besides the three official daily newspapers (*Al-Baath*, *Tishreen* and *Al-Thawra*) and regional papers, there are several magazines targeting niche audiences, such as *Al-Talei* for children in elementary school (the government recently rejected five other permit requests for children's magazines), *Al-Shabiba* for middle and high schoolers, and *The Revolution Generation* for college students. Publications such as *Socialist Workers' Struggle*, *Peasants' Struggle*, *Arab Soldier*, *Army of the People*, *Arab Engineer* and *Arab Teacher* all aim at certain professions in the Syrian labor force.

The spread of the Internet and the appearance of several online newspapers have only had a marginal impact on absolute government control, even though some Syrian officials have fretted about the topic since the press law does not address online publications. These officials are pushing for laws that specifically address online newspapers, or that amend the current laws to extend government control to cover online

“This pathetic attempt to stop the flow of information has reached the point at which Yahoo, Hotmail and some other free web-based e-mails have been blocked.”

media. Yet Syrian government agencies already have no qualms about applying repression online, blocking all sites that they see as potentially threatening – a single questionable commentary displeasing the authorities is enough to justify banning the entire website within Syria. This pathetic attempt to stop the flow of information has reached the point at which Yahoo, Hotmail and some other free web-based e-mails have been blocked, as well as websites, such as the

Committees for the Defense of Democracy, Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria, the Syrian Human Rights Committee, the Arab Commission for Human Rights, the Damascus Center for Theoretical and Civil Rights Studies, and the online counterparts for the newspapers *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, *Akhbar al-Sharq* and *Elaph*.

Some journalists, writing in foreign periodicals, have proposed that officials supervising the Syrian press permit them to write freely in the semi-official papers, without financial compensation, and with the author bearing full responsibility for the article. Syrian officials responsible for the press, however, have rejected this proposal, saying it surpasses the permissible margin of freedom, and that such a decision could only come from the highest levels. These officials reason that given the difficult circumstances Syria is currently facing – foreign “imperialism” and hostile foreign sat-

elite channels critiquing the regime – the common wisdom within the government is that such a move would be a dangerous gamble with little potential benefit.

Political Rights in Syria

As if the arsenal of laws and statutes keeping a chokehold on the press were not enough, the situation is worse with regards to political rights. In a society in which the press is censored to such extreme levels and any article that offers even a modicum of criticism can lead to harsh punishments, it is no surprise that political rights are absent and that dissent is not allowed. Conspicuously absent is any law regulating the formation of political organizations and parties, which means that any political activity can automatically be labeled illegal and be repressed. In addition, the electoral system is thoroughly unfree. In Syria, one party and the regime control electoral institutions; the nomination and electoral processes are designed for Baath party control, and the oversight of political campaigning is strict. The broad authority granted to the security services is used to eliminate political opponents. Needless to say, opposition groups are denied the right to organize, or advertise their political platforms, while the Baath Party remains politically active in support of the National Progressive Front, a coalition of parties led by the Baath. This hypocritical stance has been justified over the years by two pretexts: first, the need for national unity, stability, and protection against perceived “imperialist and Zionist enemies”; and second, Syrian society is immature, and the ruling elite is the only guardian who can distinguish between good and evil, judging what is in the people’s best interest. The end result is that humanitarian concerns and international conventions have been unable to prevent persecution in Syria.

Cultural Rights in Syria

Despite the different degrees to which restrictions on political activity have been applied, in conjunction with government censorship, the restrictions impose a stranglehold on cultural activities. Political concerns led to crackdowns on the cultural forums that briefly flourished during the “Damascus Spring” – a brief moment of political and social freedom and debate following the death of President Hafiz al-Asad in June 2011. The government banned events like the Women’s Forum in Damascus and Al-Kawakibi Forum in Aleppo, which is a discussion forum that meets to discuss government, oppression, and justice. This escalation of crackdowns culminated in the closing of Al-Atasi Forum – an independent, predominantly secular political forum and venue for democratic dialogue – in 2015 after its board was jailed for several days on the pretext that they had read aloud a letter from the Muslim Brotherhood in one of the forum’s sessions.

In May 2007, the government violently punished the signatories of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration – a document calling for improving Syrian-Lebanese relations, improving human rights and personal freedoms that was signed by hundreds of Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals – sentencing two dissidents to three years in jail and two others to 10 years. Seventeen other activists abruptly found themselves fired from their jobs, simply for having signed a joint statement with Lebanese intellectuals seeking to improve tense bilateral relations, and outlining the nature of healthier relations between Syria and Lebanon. Recently, Syria has begun to witness the arrest of dissidents on charges of circulating online political bulletins. Meanwhile, thousands of Syrians in exile are still unable to return to their country because of their sympathy with the political opposition, while Syrian Kurds are still not allowed to speak in their mother tongue, issue their own newspaper, or celebrate their traditions.

Despite the political and legal framework governing the state of free speech in Syria, it is imperative to note that the Syrian opposition also bears the same unsavory legacy as the ruling party, and has yet to make a definitive break from the ideas of the past. When the opposition claims to be the sole arbiter of the truth, it is no less presumptuous and undemocratic than the ruling Baath party is. This attitude does not inspire confidence that the political climate will improve. The opposition also feels morally justified in using any means to quash dissenting opinions, not shying away from the traditional Syrian rhetorical weapon of defamation. Opposition sympathizers who do not tow the party line are immediately under suspicion, labeled “rogues,” “agents,” or “traitors.”

Future Reform

A platform for protecting free speech in Syria will require an ambitious political, cultural and legal effort, one that must explain to Syrians how ideological oppression undermines their quality of life, and in many cases their very lives. There is ample evidence showing that government repression in Syria creates fertile soil for the growth of extremism and terrorism. The reform effort needs to begin by rejecting the failed political status quo on the grounds that it has not met the security needs of Syrians. Such terms are crucial for stemming the tide of violence and extremism, which has once again reared its ugly head in opposition to the regime’s brutality. Logically, then, limitations on freedom expression under the guise of national security, or any other pretexts, must be rejected. ■



www.taqirir.org

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