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The Vulnerability of the Arab State: Reflections on the Ayubi Thesis

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TIMUR KURAN

As the twentieth century draws to a close, many countries are making headline-grabbing attempts at economic and political liberalization. The former goal typically entails shrinking the reach of government, the latter the extension of individual rights. As a practical matter, the two goals are not always compatible. To protect individuals against theft and coercion, one needs a state strong enough to enforce the rule of law. But powers vested in the state may be abused to restrict market competition, seize property arbitrarily, and plunder collective assets. The establishment of broad political and economic liberties is therefore a delicate task that cannot be completed in a hurry. Wherever essentially free societies have emerged, the process has involved prolonged intellectual ferment and institutional experimentation.

Reforms under way in countries as varied as Russia, India, and Mexico illustrate the immense difficulties. In all such cases, state officials are resisting the curtailment of their prerogatives, and it is proving impossible to enforce full personal rights in the absence of an efficient judiciary. Nevertheless, regimes disrespectful of economic and political liberties are, if not everywhere in retreat, at least generally on the defensive. The manifest failures of communism, the welfare state, and the dirigiste development strategy have forged, at least for now, a climate of opinion that forces even socialists to acknowledge certain virtues of market freedoms and even entrenched dictators to promise broader political rights.

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The twenty-two countries of the “Arab world” offer evidence of these trends. On the whole, however, the advances of liberalization have been more limited in the Arab world than in, say, Eastern Europe or Latin America. Whereas recent elections have produced many new leaders in the latter two regions, no Arab head of state has changed by democratic means for a generation, except in Lebanon, where the presidency is reserved for a religious minority. As the *Economist* notes in an article (June 7, 1997, p. 46) on whether “Arab autocracy” is destined to last forever, the average tenure of an Arab leader is twenty-three years. Arab parliaments and consultative assemblies that have become more pluralistic, including those of Morocco, Yemen, Jordan, and Kuwait, remain toothless by the standards of countries generally considered democratic.

On the economic front, too, the pace of change has been slower than the global norm. Egypt, the most populous Arab country, has launched much-heralded privatization and liberalization drives. But so far it has achieved nothing as dramatic as the massive equity distributions accomplished in Eastern Europe. According to the *1996 Index of Economic Freedom*, Egypt has one of the highest tax rates and remains one of the “more heavily protected markets of the world”; moreover, the state continues to own and manage most industries and banks. Even the Arab countries whose rhetoric traditionally promotes free enterprise, such as the oil-rich monarchies of the Arabian peninsula, have huge state sectors that control all strategic areas of the economy.

Another distinguishing feature of the Arab world is that it has made no serious attempt at economic unification. At a time when much of Eastern Europe is preparing to join the European Economic Community, the North American Free Trade Agreement is poised to admit new members, and countries of the Asia-Pacific region are contemplating tighter economic ties, trade relations among the Arab countries remain minimal. They all trade mainly with non-Arab countries, generally maintaining tight restrictions on all economic flows across their borders, including those of capital and labor. Whereas in its heyday a millennium ago the Arab world stood at the center of a vast trading area (Abu-Lughod 1989), today it is subdivided into zones more or less isolated from one another. Even the annual Islamic pilgrimage, which until a century ago was an occasion for lively commerce along caravan routes and in Mecca, has essentially lost its importance as a coordinator of interregional trade. The contrast between the Arab world’s former interdependence and its present fragmentation is especially striking in view of the feebleness of present efforts at economic integration.

The Ayubi Thesis

Nazih Ayubi’s last book, which was in press at the time of his sudden death in 1995, explores why the Arab world has been relatively slow to embrace liberalization. Entitled *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*, it invokes the weakness of the Arab state. There is a difference, Ayubi observes, between a “hard state” and a “strong state”: one punishes and coerces, whereas the other achieves its

goals. By these definitions all Arab states are hard states, and a few, such as Syria and Iraq, are ultra-hard or “fierce” states that employ vast bureaucracies, large armies, harsh prisons, and sometimes firing squads to preserve themselves by force. But these hard states are also weak states that lack the capacity to enforce laws, break traditional patterns, and adapt to changing conditions. Ayubi’s two generalizations are not unrelated. States rely on violence insofar as they cannot accomplish their objectives through persuasion and economic incentives.

The Arab world doubtless contains individuals who recognize the virtues of democracy and free enterprise, as well as those who genuinely want economic and political unification. If they have not brought about ambitious liberalization movements, the reason, according to Ayubi, lies in their political frailties. As a case in point, high-ranking Egyptian statesmen have long known that their government’s subsidies and price controls are sources of inefficiency, but they consider themselves powerless to launch ambitious reforms. They remember that when President Sadat sought to trim Egypt’s legendary food subsidies, popular unrest made him beat a hasty retreat. In another example of official feebleness, certain Saudi Arabian officials are known to worry about their country’s generous welfare system, which allows citizens to lead comfortable lives without trying to make themselves productive. However, the system persists for fear that reactions to a removal of the prevailing privileges would threaten the incumbent regime.

The Ayubi thesis is anything but self-evident. A long line of distinguished thinkers, most notably Karl Wittfogel, author of *Oriental Despotism* (1957), have held that in the Middle East the state has always been strong and civil society always weak. Wittfogel’s argument, which draws on both Marx and Weber, hinges on the state’s control of most land and irrigation systems. Although the specifics of Wittfogel’s thesis are generally treated with skepticism, its essential message enjoys wide acceptance. Indeed, the conventional wisdom is that Middle Eastern states, like their counterparts in India and China, are all-powerful. *Over-stating the Arab State* contains much counterevidence, at least with regard to the present. Ayubi argues that, regardless of the status of Arab civil society, three interconnected factors drastically limit the Arab state’s capacity for social control. The first pertains to vested interests against political or economic liberalization. The second consists of cultural dispositions favorable to authoritarianism. And the third involves inhibitions against reforms liable to fuel uncontrollable and self-augmenting demands for redistribution.

Barriers to Free Expression

Each of Ayubi’s explanations is grounded in reality, as he himself shows with diverse evidence. But he does not blend them into a unified framework. Without trying to draw out their linkages, he simply articulates and rearticulates them in scattered segments of the long book, often within sections on the records of particular Arab coun-

tries. Consequently, readers interested in precise statements of the causal mechanisms at play will be disappointed. However much they benefit from the book's many insights, they will come away feeling that it leaves certain critical connections unexamined. A related problem pertains to units of analysis. In each basic explanation for the Arab world's inertia, these are either groups linked by common interests or simply individuals. But the bulk of the analysis invokes states as additional actors bent on self-preservation. How states relate to the people and groups at the center of the three basic explanations remains unclear. As inanimate institutions rather than flesh-and-blood actors, states actually have no interests of their own. Nor do they think. Their objectives, insofar as one can identify them, must be those of the individuals and collectivities who control their movements.

Had Ayubi used a more coherent methodology, he might have given fuller support to his thesis, which carries critical implications for the geopolitics of the twenty-first century. He might also have produced additional insights. Recognizing that state officials form overlapping and sometimes competing pressure groups, he could have identified why the opponents of liberalization have the upper hand against the masses of potential beneficiaries. The missing methodological concept, which might also have helped link the argument's various components, is that of *expressive equilibrium*. Though implicit throughout the discussion, the idea never gains recognition as a key conceptual tool.

In many parts of the book, most pointedly in those concerned with Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, Ayubi directs attention to the ubiquity of official controls on public expression. But his methodology precludes insights into the pervasiveness and persistence of these controls. It does not explain why, for instance, mobile phones and access to the Internet remain banned in Syria (*Economist*, January 17, 1998, p. 42) at a time when many countries are debating how these new technologies will reshape global business. The book is on target in identifying systematic repression as an obstacle to change. But it is misleading to ascribe the observed repression only to the abuses of state officials. Responsibility lies also, if not mainly, with ordinary Arabs who keep quiet or even actively support the political status quo in the face of tyranny and inefficiency. To one degree or another, every Arab country exhibits an expressive equilibrium in which individuals refrain from speaking honestly for fear that the vast majority of their fellow citizens will stay loyal to the status quo, leaving dissidents isolated. And every potential dissident who exhibits such reticence discourages other malcontents from publicizing their complaints.

By pointing to the vulnerability of the Arab world's hard states, this observation supports the Ayubi thesis. It suggests that, whatever the recent historical record, many Arab regimes are highly vulnerable to a shock that would stimulate mass dissent. Indeed, even an ostensibly minor rise in open opposition within one Arab country might trigger a revolutionary cascade that then sets off similar cascades in others. Just such a domino process occurred in Eastern Europe less than a decade ago, when people

within and outside the region marveled at the collapse of one communist regime after another. The scenario could be repeated in the Arab world.

Before developing this claim, however, I shall return to Ayubi's provocative treatise to critique the three explanations he offers to elucidate why the Arab world has not seen major movements for free markets and democratic government.

Vested Interests against Liberalism

The crux of Ayubi's first explanation is that neither the state bureaucracy nor the business class is eager for genuine economic or political liberalization. The bureaucracy fears that economic liberalization would undermine many state functions, the business class that it would lose its current privileges and protections. Moreover, both groups fear that political liberalization would expose their inefficiencies. This part of the argument applies, of course, to dozens of non-Arab countries as well. The originality of Ayubi's version springs from his observation that neither group wants the Arab world to unify. The claim may be illustrated through an exception that proves the rule: Egypt and Syria's abortive unification in 1958. Their joint state, the United Arab Republic, failed within three years because Syrian merchants resented the controls that Egypt's vast bureaucracy sought to extend to them, and their Egyptian counterparts resented the competition.

The Egyptian political economist Samir Amin ([1976] 1978) argues that the Arabs formed a long-lasting political union only when, in the early Islamic period, merchants integrated them economically through long-distance trade and enjoyed enough power to keep trade routes open. As trade routes became less safe, merchants lost power, lowering pressures for political integration. At present, Amin further observes, the Arab mercantile class is small and weak, which is why we observe no major movement for integration. Ayubi adds that where we *do* observe some liberalization or privatization, as in Egypt in the 1990s, the impetus is invariably a fiscal crisis that necessitates reforms as the price for international assistance.

As elsewhere, in the Arab world both economic and political liberalization carry far-reaching implications for the distribution of power and wealth among groups divided by essentially ascriptive characteristics such as tribal affiliation, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or region. In Jordan, Ayubi observes, the bureaucracy and the military are filled overwhelmingly with native Jordanians whereas commerce is dominated by Palestinians; hence, liberalization could overturn the prevailing ethnic distribution of influence (p. 371). In the United Arab Emirates, where 90 percent of the labor force is foreign, the better-paid Emiratis constitute 37 percent of the government bureaucracy but merely 3 percent of the private labor force. So economic privatization could further enlarge the foreign share of the labor force, possibly jeopardizing the privileges of ruling families, if not the regimes themselves (pp. 381–82). As a final example, Syria's merchants are predominantly Sunni Muslims, whereas its ruling elites belong

mostly to the Alawi sect. As one might expect, the Alawis tend to be staunch defenders of heavy state control over the economy.

Even in countries with small foreign labor forces, such as Egypt and Tunisia, the gains from privatization tend to be distributed unevenly. Because the courts are inefficient, regional or tribal mafias are able to enclose segments of the market as their own exclusive domains. Moreover, the sale of state-owned enterprises generally results in windfall gains for the cronies and relatives of incumbent leaders. On the basis of such observations, Ayubi argues that in the Arab world economic liberalization, insofar as it occurs, brings a passage not “from plan to market” but “from plan to clan” (p. 403). This suggestion, though intrinsically reasonable, conflicts with the proposition that neither bureaucrats nor businessmen want privatization. If certain groups stand to gain handsomely from privatization, why are they not promoting reforms enthusiastically? More generally puzzling is the absence of vocal support for privatization on the part of citizens, consumers, and workers who do not share in the rents of the politically well-connected. It is one thing to identify vested interests against change, quite another to explain why they prevail. To explain the observed social inertia fully, one needs a richer framework than what Ayubi offers.

Cultural Obstacles to a Free Order

The missing elements of the framework will be introduced shortly. But let me turn next to the cultural component of Ayubi’s argument. Notwithstanding the Marxian underpinnings of his thinking, he acknowledges early on that culture reflects much more than economics and is extremely difficult to change (p. 29). He then considers various cultural barriers to liberalization. The main impediment to economic liberalization, he suggests, is the long-standing weakness of private property rights. Private property never developed the legitimacy that it acquired in the West, partly because successive rulers reallocated agricultural estates to prevent the emergence of a hereditary landed nobility and partly because wealth and status traditionally stemmed from closeness to political power rather than from economic productivity. As for political liberalization, the chief obstacle is the dominant approach to liberty in traditional Islamic thought. Historically, Ayubi explains, liberty has carried mainly a “psychological and metaphysical” meaning in Islamic discourse, rather than a “political and social” one. Significantly, until modern times, slavery connoted not the opposite of liberty but proximity to the ruler, which may explain why it lasted longer in the Middle East than in the West (pp. 24–29).

The consequence of such cultural legacies, Ayubi infers, is the prevailing weakness of the Arab demand for political and economic liberties. As in every known society, individuals scream when their own property is confiscated, and they resent controls on their personal economic activities. However, they generally exhibit little desire for a genuinely liberal order based on free enterprise, limited government, and the rule of law.

A common mistake in critiques of non-Western societies is the presumption that in the West there exists vast support for a liberal order. In fact, clear majorities in European and European-settled societies support illiberal policies ranging from wage controls to restrictions on “hate speech.” So, at least with respect to liberal attitudes, the cultural differences between the West and “the rest,” though doubtless not imaginary, are less stark than they are typically made to appear. All societies, including those of Europe and North America, carry within them the seeds of intolerance and authoritarianism. What makes the Arab world stand out, then, is simply its recent record of extreme illiberalism. Whereas widely reviled Western writers may find social niches within which they enjoy acceptance, such havens are less prevalent in the Middle East and North Africa. Another difference involves constitutional protections. In contrast to Western societies, where individuals whose freedoms have been violated may receive assistance from courts strong enough to stand up even to high executives, in the Arab world such checks and balances are at best unreliable. Nothing in Ayubi’s work contradicts these interpretations, but his focus on the personal dimensions of culture obscures the significance of institutional factors.

In a particularly bold segment of the book, Ayubi argues that pan-Arabism, far from being an innovative force for growth and liberation, has been a source of illiberal conservatism (pp. 136–51). Born as a defensive response to Turkish nationalism, European colonialism, and Zionism, pan-Arabism emphasizes communal solidarity and considers individualism an alien trait to be suppressed. Thus, it uses modern nationalism as a vehicle for preserving the anti-individualist strands of the Arab cultural heritage. But it has been manifestly unsuccessful in achieving its ambitious political goals. Capable of galvanizing crowds and instilling communal pride, it has taught successive generations that the individual Arab can prosper only as a servant of the global Arab community. Yet it has not unified Arabs either politically or economically. On the contrary, by granting legitimacy to the most illiberal regimes of the Arab world, including the Baathist regimes of Syria and Iraq, it has delayed both economic and political liberalization and hindered viable unification.

Arabism did not set precedents for the Arab world’s integration. Unified initially by the rise of Islam, the region was reunified nine centuries later by a non-Arab Muslim dynasty—the Ottomans seated in Istanbul—that justified its rule in Islamic terms. Given this history, it is unsurprising that pan-Islamism competes with pan-Arabism as an ideal to integrate Arabs within a broad political entity. Pan-Islamism aims to forge an Islamic *umma*, a universal community of Muslims, which would operate according to holy laws and hallowed principles of religious solidarity.

Like pan-Arabism, argues Ayubi, pan-Islamism has been a romantic and highly ritualistic doctrine; ignoring many practical issues of modern life, it has been largely oblivious to the challenges of strengthening and expanding markets. In the light of Muslim economic history, these patterns are quite striking. The jurists of early Islam codified financial rules to facilitate long-distance trade, and the governments of the

period insistently protected a vast network of trade routes. But the pan-Islamists of our own age, including those of the Arab world, have done little to revive the pro-mercantile traditions within Islam's rich heritage.

Nor, with few exceptions, have they been promoting the religion's own principle of limited government as the basis for a drive to strengthen the rule of law. They could have launched such a drive simply by invoking the traditional Islamic idea that rulers are subject to the law no less than their humble servants. In failing to do so, and by ignoring also the Euro-American view that a proper order stems from an implicit contract among different members of society or between them and their ruler, the pan-Islamists have kept themselves well within the parameters of the prevailing cultural patterns.

Ayubi's cultural explanation for the Arab world's inertia is thus that its traditional economic and political illiberalism has, for all appearances of a multiparty struggle over social fundamentals, effectively homogenized the competing worldviews—home-grown pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism no less than European-inspired nationalism and socialism.

The Curse of Oil Wealth

Ayubi's final explanation for the Arab world's observed rigidity hinges on wealth differences within and among Arab states. Comprising just 8 percent of the Arab population, the oil-rich countries of the Arabian peninsula accounted for more than half its combined gross national product in the early 1980s (pp. 158–59). Even today, with much lower oil prices, Saudi Arabia's per capita GNP is 27 times that of neighboring, resource-poor Yemen and 9 times that of Egypt. If only because of such inequalities, the citizens of the oil-blessed states show little enthusiasm for a pan-Arab union that would require them to share their wealth with Yemenis and Egyptians; and they appear even less prepared for a veritable Islamic *umma* that would divert oil wealth toward Chadian, Tanzanian, and Bangladeshi Muslims now living on less than one dollar a day. True, the oil-rich Arab governments provide more development aid per capita than the industrialized world, but the amounts are still minuscule in relation to the prevailing disparities. In any case, the assistance leaves intact the principal source of the inequality: the heavy concentration of oil deposits in one thinly populated region.

Echoing a common theme, Ayubi observes that the Arab "petrocracies," led by Saudi Arabia, use Islam as a tool for keeping oil wealth away from other Arabs and Muslims (pp. 230–40). By supporting socioeconomically conservative religious centers and Islamization movements throughout the world, they make it seem that their resources are advancing the goal of Islamic unification. Their real motive, however, is to shield themselves from criticism by making disapproval of them appear as a rejection of Islam.

Similar pacification processes have occurred within the oil-rich countries. The ruling families have achieved some immunity against domestic opposition simply by

linking themselves and their regimes to Islamic symbols. Yet glaring inequalities caused by barriers to competition exist even within the oil-rich states. As a rule, sensitive or lucrative jobs are held exclusively by the ruling family and their close friends; many other citizens receive subsidies and privileges; and the foreign workers, who play a vital economic role, earn the least. Depending on the country, Egyptians, Yemenis, and other Arabs from resource-poor states form a significant segment of the foreign labor force. The differences between their own modest lifestyles and the opulent ones of many citizens, especially the royal families, are a source of deep resentment. If we see little open opposition to the status quo, the reason, according to Ayubi, is that no one wants to rock the boat. Diverse citizens remain passive in the belief that efforts to curtail the privileges of their elites could ignite a chain reaction likely to destroy not only their rulers but also their own rents.

Concealment of Dissent

Such strategic calculations have doubtless bolstered the Arab world's inertia. But there is a more general reason for the paucity of open dissent: fear of reprisals. Throughout the Arab world, as in many other places, individuals unhappy about prevailing conditions routinely keep quiet, even feign contentment, simply to escape the punishments imposed on critics. These forms of preference falsification help conceal the magnitude of private dissent and reinforce public support for the status quo. Hence, they distort the expressive incentives of others. Indeed, by tilting public opinion in favor of the status quo, they discourage other discontented individuals from expressing *their* grievances. Such preference falsifiers need not be hiding identical grievances. Some might resent the wealth disparities among Arab states, others the vested interests that keep key economic sectors closed to competition, and still others the un-Islamic decadence of their rulers.

Whatever their motivational differences, individuals who misrepresent their political preferences under real or perceived social pressures help sustain an equilibrium whereby the prevailing autocracies survive indefinitely, along with their protectionist and dirigiste economic policies. The observed political stability of the Arab world is thus attributable at least partly to the concealment of grievances. A related factor is the ignorance generated as a by-product of widespread preference falsification. Insofar as Arab citizens hide, shade, or distort their misgivings about prevailing policies, Arab public discourse on the relative merits of political alternatives gets truncated and corrupted. Given that public discourse is a major source of perceptions and understandings, a basic consequence is thus the reduction of knowledge about the available social options. Indeed, if all but a few vocal "extremists" refrain from questioning dirigisme or offering democratic alternatives to dictatorship, most individuals will remain unaware of the range of possible reforms. They may know that governments and economies operate differently elsewhere, that there exist countries with freer markets and

broader rights. But one can sense that other systems are different without being able to identify what is possible and desirable in one's own country. Without exposure to honest and open discussion, most people cannot develop a clear sense of viable reforms.

In *Cruelty and Silence* (1993), which focuses on Iraq, Kanan Makiya highlights the feebleness of protests against the brutality of Arab governments, even when the victims themselves are Arabs. Invoking Makiya's observations, along with others in the same vein, Ayubi provides many examples of political, social, and intellectual repression. But he does not link these indications with his three-pronged explanation for the Arab world's inertia. More critical, he generally makes it seem that the source of repression is only the state and the beneficiaries of official policies. In reality, anyone who refrains from objecting to tyranny, even one of its manifest victims, serves as an accomplice. A person engaged in preference falsification may be a victim and a victimizer simultaneously.

Although Ayubi misses the significance of preference falsification, he offers intriguing evidence that the phenomenon is ubiquitous in the Arab world. He reports, for example, that Iraq's long-standing dictator, Saddam Hussein, has periodically used calculated and limited democratization campaigns to entice hidden dissent into the open. Hussein's motivation has apparently been to identify critics before launching new purges and executions aimed at dampening threats to his regime (p. 425). For every covert opponent that the Iraqi dictator has managed to trick into sincerity, there have probably been many others too cautious to fall for his Machiavellian schemes. Another revealing example pertains to Saudi Arabia, where the placement and promotion of security personnel are based more on loyalty to the ruling family than on merit (pp. 283–87). The observation suggests that the Saudi rulers recognize the pervasiveness of preference falsification on matters critical to their survival and that they fear their own people. Evidently, they realize that to protect the status quo they must guard against placing their hidden opponents in positions of power.

If the Arab world exhibits rampant preference falsification on social fundamentals, responsibility for the observed inertia does not belong solely, or even mainly, to "vested interests." It belongs also to quiescent and complacent "nonvested interests"—unprivileged, oppressed, or exploited groups who remain politically docile. The missing element in Ayubi's explanation is thus that the prevailing expressive equilibrium keeps the potentially tremendous opposition underground. If inequalities within and among Arab countries receive little attention, this condition prevails partly because the beneficiaries of hefty rents stigmatize the advocates of redistribution as troublemakers, and those privately sympathetic to the reformers generally fail to support them publicly. Yet the commonness of private reformist sentiment would come into the open if the prevailing expressive equilibrium were somehow to begin unraveling. As conditions became more favorable to the expression of opposition, individuals would jump on the bandwagon for change, encouraging additional people to join in.

Let us now reconsider the claim that authoritarian and paternalistic elements of traditional Arab culture have homogenized its warring ideological currents. Arabists, Islamists, socialists, and sundry populists disagree openly about personalities, symbols, and the fine-tuning of established institutions. But facing the same expressive disincentives regarding fundamental political and social structures, in their own ways they all accommodate the status quo, sensing that to raise major objections would put them starkly at odds with public opinion. Insofar as they choose prudence over sincerity, they all contribute to the preservation of illiberal structures.

The Arab State's Weakness Reinterpreted

The idea that the Arab world exhibits an expressive equilibrium shaped substantially by preference falsification is consistent with the Ayubi thesis. If the supporters of established political and economic structures include millions who privately desire various reforms, those structures may be very vulnerable, however entrenched they appear to the untrained eye. A shock that impels a few people to vocalize their grievances and demand reforms may catalyze a bandwagon process that resets the terms of acceptable public discourse and renders the incumbent regime unsustainable. Moreover, a bandwagon that topples one Arab autocracy may encourage covert dissidents in other Arab states to press their own cases, thus fueling a domino effect that alters the social landscape through much, if not all, of the Arab world. Such a scenario may appear far-fetched. But remember that barely a decade ago Eastern Europe consisted of Soviet satellites whose populations were, at least publicly, overwhelmingly supportive of central planning under communist dictatorship. And not even the wildest dreamers foresaw the emergence of fifteen independent and generally liberalizing post-Soviet states.

In the present interpretation, then, the weakness of the Arab state follows directly from the nature of the incumbent expressive equilibria. The Arab state is weaker than, say, the fifth French Republic, because it enjoys less genuine legitimacy. Although there is less open dissent in Syria against Assad than in France against the Jospin administration, in a free multicandidate election by secret ballot Assad would probably receive much less support than Jospin did in 1997. This claim, which in principle is testable, points to a key deficiency of the Ayubi thesis. Although the Arab autocracies are indeed weak, in Ayubi's argument this observation does not flow from an analytically coherent interpretation of evidence. His various explanations for the Arab world's inertia, though all illuminating, do not exhaust the reasons why the typical Arab ruler has been in power for almost a quarter century. Nor do they make clear why the Arab world features few major opposition movements in the open.

For all their ability to lock up dissidents and preserve their seats, Arab leaders are terrified of economic or political liberalization. The expressive interpretation makes sense of this puzzle. Like all nondemocratic rulers, those of the Arab world sense that their public support vastly exaggerates their private support. They understand that if reformist

movements ever gather momentum, public discourse could turn against them and threaten their own survival. They also know that privatization, by transferring resources to groups beyond their control, could trigger a self-reinforcing change in expressive incentives. They are therefore reluctant to embrace democratization or privatization, lest the generated frustrations and hopes spark a revolutionary prairie fire.

There is one major exception to the generalization that Arab dissent lies mostly underground: Islamist opposition that has mounted major challenges to incumbent regimes, including those of Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and, most dramatically, Algeria. In parliaments that permit organized dissent, such as Jordan's, the Islamists form the principal opposition; and in the most repressive regimes, it is again the Islamists who pose the main extralegal threat to the regime. This pattern, which Ayubi recognizes, admits no explanation within his own framework. It fits naturally, however, into the expressive alternative. If there is any public forum that an Arab government cannot close down, it is the mosque. Although it might arrest clerics for subversion and regulate the content of religious education, its ability to control organizations that claim an Islamic identity is still limited. Consequently, to dissatisfied people of all walks of life Islamism offers the safest forum for venting frustrations and exploring solutions on matters ranging from constitutional rules to making a living.

If Islamist regimes were to take root across the Arab world, what would that development mean for economic and political liberalization? Islamism is by no means a homogeneous movement, so diverse scenarios are possible, including the advancement of democracy and free enterprise. But the precedent of Iran's Islamic revolution and the current rhetoric of many leading Arab Islamists suggest that illiberal policies could well endure under new garb. If the illiberal wing of Islamism were to gain the upper hand, the Arab state could retain its economic dominance, making just minor concessions to global economic forces; and anti-Islamists could be forced underground, causing open dissent on fundamentals to remain as rare as it today.

Waiting for Arab Democracy

To identify possible scenarios is not to make precise forecasts regarding the timing and nature of regime changes. From indications of widespread hidden discontent, one may infer that coalitions to topple the incumbent regimes could grow quickly in response to the right shock. But too many variables are at play to know what such a shock would entail and when it might arrive. Fortunately, at least for future scholarship, if a string of regime changes does occur, it will probably bring to light much data to make itself intelligible. The precedents of the Iranian revolution of 1978–79 and the East European revolutions of 1989 are instructive here. As I have documented elsewhere (Kuran 1989; 1995, chaps. 15–16), those events surprised their participants and observers, but now, in retrospect, there is no shortage of explanations. Memoirs, opinion surveys,

and other documents that came to light in the aftermath of these revolutions reveal the toppled regimes to have been far weaker than was once thought.

The players in high Arab politics know well the possibilities bottled up within today's entrenched regimes. They also understand that the status quo can be protected indefinitely by blocking all possible revolutionary triggers. So, unlike politicians in democracies, they act as if engaged in a terminal war. The Algerian regime's decision to annul the 1992 elections that would have ushered in an Islamist government, like the savagery of the subsequent and still unresolved civil war, reflects a suspicion that a pro-Islamist regime change would be irreversible through democratic means, along with a belief that the change might be avoided through brutal repression.

Whatever the barriers to forecasting the Arab world's evolution, one thing is clear. The endurance of the incumbent Arab regimes masks their enormous weaknesses. In his last book, Nazih Ayubi drove home the point with wit while offering numerous insights that will inspire refinements. He did so, moreover, in a refreshingly bold way. Unlike most academic researchers of the Arab world's internal dynamics, he faced up to sensitive questions involving stability, legitimacy, and cultural liabilities. Significantly, the unusualness of *Over-stating the Arab State* is itself evidence for its main thesis. If the prevailing Arab regimes were strong, their leaders would not treat the messengers of discomfiting news as enemies to be silenced, and such messengers would be more common.

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