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The Fourth Wave: Revolution and Democratization in the Arab Middle East

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By Muhamad Olimat[1]

This Special Issue on Arab women, the first of two issues, is timely in that it comes amid a wave of radical changes sweeping the Arab world. Arab women have always been active participants in the socio-economic and political affairs of the Middle East and the Islamic world, and are key in shaping the present and the future of the region. When the idea of devoting a Special Issue to Arab Women was conceived a year ago, clearly the momentous social movements sweeping the region today were clearly not visible to the public. Nevertheless, democratic struggle has never been alien to the region.

Since World War II, several democratic waves have swept the globe, but the Arab world seemed to be immune to them. While the Arab people managed to liberate themselves from seven hundred years of foreign rule, they lagged far behind in liberating themselves from domestic tyranny.

The democratic waves brought drastic change and stability to many parts of the world. The first wave in post WWII transformed Japan, Germany, and Italy into democratic governments, while the second wave in the early '70s did the same for Portugal, Spain, and other countries. Possibly, the most peculiar was the third wave. Associated with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, its greatest manifestation was the collapse of the Berlin Wall that led to flourishing democracies in East and Central Europe. The Arab people watched it crumple with joy and envy: while they celebrated with the rest of the world the end of an agonizing Cold War, they envied the Germans for their success in uniting their homeland. Arabs longed to be part of the wave as democratic forces in the Arab World looked up to the West hoping for support. However, their hopes were in vain as Arab regimes resisted change, cracked down on democratic forces, and tightened their grip of power as never before. At that time, Algeria was the testing ground for democratization in the Arab world. Under tremendous popular pressure, Ben Jaded, the then President of Algeria, allowed free elections to take place, and pledged to exit from the political scene. For the first time in the country's history, elections were conducted in a free and transparent manner. When Islamists appeared to be gaining the majority of popular vote the military took over, and the country plunged into a two-decade civil war in which over 200,000. Algerians lost their lives. It was obvious that external support was neither feasible nor materializing, as an alliance between the local ruling elites and external interests strengthened the role of the state and weakened the emerging civil society in the Arab Middle East. This situation prolonged military dictatorships and tyrannical rule in the region more than any other part of the world.

The democratic West showed no sympathy, commitment to, or support of democratic forces in the region. On the contrary, western democracies such as France and Britain, in particular, were and have been major obstacles to the process of transition to democracy in the Arab World. On policy levels, as a former US Ambassador put it, "the US Government has for so long practiced "democratic exceptionalism,"[1] and other Western democracies never deviated from this norm. In the region, the West has been

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acting under the false assumption that western interests are best served under authoritarian rule rather than democratic governments. This is in addition to another misconception: Arabs and Muslims cannot establish democratic governments and societies because of an alleged incompatibility of their political culture with modern norms of democracy.

On the intellectual scene, two schools of thought were dominant in the debate over the predicament of democracy in the Arab World: the "exceptional" and the "compatibility" discourse. The former advocated the thesis that the Arab Middle East is an "exceptional" case, immune to democracy because of the incompatibility of Arab-Islamic political culture with the universal values of democracy. Arab political culture and Islam are held responsible for the democratic "gap" in the region. Huntington, Mirsky, Dealy, Lewis and others were the main proponents of this view. In the '90s, their writings dominated the intellectual discourse on the region. Huntington's *Clash of Civilization* thesis was taken for granted in Orientalism Scholarship towards the region.[2] The latter, the "compatibility" school of thought led by area specialists, advocated the thesis that Islam and Arab political culture are no less compatible with democracy than other cultures and religions. Esposito, Hudson, Ibrahim, Norton, Richards and other scholars advocated this view.[3]

Most of the literature of the third Wave that concerns the Middle East examined the "why" aspect of democracy rather than the "how," that is, researching why the Arab Middle East and the Islamic world are undemocratic instead of investigating "how" to bring about a successful process of transition to democracy. Huntington's writings, as well as those of Lewis and Fukuyama, represented this view. Niblock attempted as early as 1998 to change the debate calling for an examination of the instruments of democratization instead of investing decades of fruitless debate about "why" Arabs can never be "democrats." His call fell on deaf ears. It appeared as if Orietalists' main goal was to discourage endogenous democratic forces or external voices from proceeding in their struggle for democracy in the region.[4]

In a previous article entitled *The Fourth Wave,*[5] I examined the efforts of democratization in the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, 2001 when the Bush Administration reversed "democratic exceptionalism," and strongly advocated democratization in the Arab World. The Administration believed that democratization is the best instrument for stability and coexistence, as well as the best answer in dealing with terrorism. President Bush stated:

> Are the people of the Middle East somehow beyond the reach of liberty? Are millions of men and women and children condemned by history or culture to live in despotism? Are they alone never to know freedom, and never even to have a choice in the matter? I, for one, do not believe it. I believe every person has the ability and the right to be free. ... More than half of all the Muslims in the world live in freedom under democratically constituted governments. They succeed in democratic societies, not in spite of their faith, but because of it. A religion that demands individual moral accountability, and encourages the encounter of the individual with God is fully compatible with the rights and responsibilities of self-government.

He also addressed governments in the region: "instead of dwelling on past wrongs and blaming others, governments in the Middle East need to confront real problems, and serve the true interests of their nations. The good and capable people of the Middle East all deserve responsible leadership. For too long, many people in that region have been victims and subjects - they deserve to be active citizens." While democratic forces were relatively optimistic between 2002 and 2008, the pressure of the Bush Administration faded quickly as two major figures in the region, Mubarak of Egypt and Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, resisted any process to accommodate the opposition or to incorporate it in the political process.[6]

In his speech to the Islamic World on June 2nd, 2009, President Obama stated:

> I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideals; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere. Now, there is no straight line to realize this promise. But this much is clear: governments that protect these rights are ultimately more stable, successful, and secure. Suppressing ideals never succeeds in making them go away. [7]

However, dictatorial regimes in the region that fiercely defend the status quo and reject change continue to resist President Obama and the repeated calls of his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton.

As a consequence, any change in the region will be violent and revolutionary. As we have seen over the past month, uprisings are surging throughout the Middle East. They are not surprising to area specialists who over the past thirty years have been warning us about the danger of ignoring popular demands of freedom in the Arab world. However, they came as a shock to policy makers and leaders in western capitals who for so long ignored such demands. Not only that, they supported tyranny in the region and provided tyrants with military, political, diplomatic, and financial aid to strengthen their autocratic regimes, and simultaneously weakened democratic forces and the emerging civil society institutions in the Middle East. The uprisings indicate that at last the Arab people are realizing that any democratic change must come from within. While revolutions are still unfolding in the region, we need to keep in mind the following elements that might enhance or jeopardize their democratic potential.

The first and foremost concern worldwide has to deal with the issue of oil and energy resources in the Arab Middle East. Western and global supremacy over oil-producing countries is a main factor in upholding tyrants. Oil consumers believe that their interests are well protected by autocrats, and feel threatened by democratic governments should democracy indeed triumph in the region. However, oil consumers need to realize that democratic governments will sell oil as well, and will be more stable and free trade-oriented. Furthermore, free governments are more likely to abide by market mechanisms in terms of oil production, pricing, supply, demand, and marketing. Such free trade mechanisms would reduce the heavy investment in armaments to protect oil routes and maintain military presence in the Middle East, especially for the United States. The US

security support of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, UAE, and other oil-producing countries is only understood from an oil perspective. Therefore, democratic authority would free both producers and consumers from unnecessary fear over the flow, pricing, and marketing of oil, within the context of free trade that protects the interests of both sides.

The second factor deals with Western fears of Islam and Islamists as a political force in the region. The West continues to hold unfounded imagery about Islam as a religion, and Islamists as a political force in the region over the past millennium. The most misunderstood movement, and by far the most popular, is the Muslim Brotherhood, a mainstream reform movement established in 1928 by a schoolteacher named Hasan Al Bana. The movement has been an integral part of the socio-economic and political struggles of the region since then. Its marginalization from politics is unrealistic and counterproductive. Its landslide electoral success in several Arab and Islamic countries is a testament to popular support and trust placed in this Islamic current. Therefore, instead of excluding Islamists from politics, they should be assured of their right to participate in politics, and engaged in constructive dialogue with the West; its members should be trained in parliamentary processes, and assisted in moderating their platforms to better serve the cause of democracy.

While Arab ruling elites and military dictatorships understand the movement and its goals and methods very well, the West in particular needs to better understand Islamists. Regimes exploit this gap by exaggerating the threat of Islamists to western interests. Therefore, they present themselves as a better alternative to Islam. The burden of taking steps to ensure mutual understanding lies on the shoulders of both sides. Islamists must make themselves known to and well understood by the entire world. They must initiate and accept an open dialogue with the West. They must work openly, as secrecy only creates an atmosphere of suspicion, mistrust, and antagonism. Islamists need to realize that there are no divine or scriptural impediments to accepting western initiatives for such dialogue. There are no religious impediments to talking with the United States in particular on formal or informal levels. Islamists must know that the current world operates under the rules of compromise, openness, dialogue, mutual understanding, mutual interests, globalization, multiculturalism, cultural dialogue, interfaith dialogue, and Civilizational dialogue. There is no room in the current world for clandestine behavior, isolationism, or self-imposed confinements as long as individuals seek an active participation in the political life of their nation. Islamists must also modify their political discourse, tactics, and strategies in dealing with local, regional, and international affairs.

By the same token, rather than viewing them as foes, the West ought to accept Islamists as active participants in the political milieu of the region, and deal with them on equal footing, as partners in the process of transition to democracy. Islamists' platforms are similar to Christian Democrats in Europe and Republicans in the US as they're inspired by faith, but practical enough to ensure good government, such as in the case of Turkey and Malaysia.

Another element in the democratization process deals with the War on Terror. Lack of democracy is fully responsible for terrorism, extremism, and instability in the region. Western policy makers continue to hold Islam and Islamists fully responsible for terrorism, while autocrats in the region are considered close allies. However, a closer

exam reveals that the direct response to tyrannical rule was the radicalization of segments of Muslim society. Dictatorial regimes create terrorism, extremism, and violence, and democratization is the best way to combat them. In Egypt, state tyranny has been a major element in radicalizing mainstream Islamists and moving them toward extremism and terrorism.

The security of Israel and its survival is another element in the current democratization debate. The US and the Israel government are concerned that if the governments of Egypt and Jordan fall, Israel will have to shoulder the burden of securing hundreds of miles of borders. However, the Israeli government should view democratic change as a positive force, and attempt to build on it. In fact, democratic forces in Israel, as well as the Israeli civil society, are in a better position to build bridges of friendship, peace, and coexistence with their neighbors. Democracies do not fight each other, and democratic people aspire to similar sets of values and goals.

Overall, a democratic change in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and other countries in the region would provide both Israelis and Palestinians with confidence and an incentive to engage in serious negotiations to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel would be more inclined to accept the two-state solution, while Palestinians would be more willing to accept an independent and democratic state of Palestine that lives in peace with its neighbors. In the long run, Israel would be more secure in a democratic context than in an autocratic neighborhood.

While international concerns are legitimate, so as the concerns and the ambitions of the Arab people as well. The revolutions occurring in the region represent the yearning of the Arab people for freedom and dignity. For so long, the world has ignored the wishes of the Arab people prolonging the reign of dictatorship in the region. Maybe, the world should put the Arab people, their human rights and dignity ahead of oil interests at least for one single time.

Under global scrutiny, western decision makers seem traumatized by the developments occurring in the Arab world. The Obama Administration's response thus far to the Egyptian Revolution changed in a week's time from support of Mubarak to an "orderly change" to pressuring Mubarak to resign. In other parts of the Arab world, the administration is clear in calling and acting for regime-change especially in Libya. While the administration seems to understand the necessity for change in the region, it remains reactive rather proactive, and lags far behind the developments in the region. The issue of understanding the depth of resentment to some regimes still seems to difficult for some Western governments to comprehend. The Saudi situation, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, and Oman will be the real challenge. In the long run, the solution to world stability visa vie the Middle East seems rather simple: promoting democratization and political development, accommodating all political forces in the region including Islamists and resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. The main instrument for such stability is democracy, the rule of law, transparency, employment, and good governance.

This Special Issue on Arab women highlights the struggle, accomplishments, goals and aspirations of Arab women as they assume leading roles in the New Arab World. The articles included in this issue ranges from general overview to conditions of Arab women, to case studies. I am thankful for the assistance provided by my two co-host editors Dr. Rowaida Maaitah, the President of the Hashemite University in Jordan and Dr. Hmoud Olimat, Dean of the Social Work Center at the University of Jordan.

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As stated above, there will be a second issue on Arab Women entitled: *Arab Women, Revolution and Democratization in the Arab Middle East.* The announcement, recruitment of authors and deadlines will be posted on the JIWS website soon. We invite all interested authors and activists to submit manuscripts to the issue.

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[6] President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East. Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, United States Chamber of Commerce, Washington, D.C. November 6, 2003.

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