

The Arab Predicament, Circa 2002:

How Can Arabs Fix the Problems of the Arab World? (Part III)

Oct 4, 2002



In-Depth Reports

I want to start by praising someone who is not here, who would have been a good contributor to this discussion, my good friend Saad Eddin Ibrahim. (Applause.) He is a scholar, an activist, someone who is willing to pay the price of his convictions, even though that price is high, and even though he was told in no uncertain terms that he could avoid paying that price by keeping silent. In this regard, Saad, who began as a student of the problems of Arab society, has become a case study illustrating the seriousness of those problems.

The first thing that Saad and I would agree upon is that the inflation of power wielded by the authoritarian Arab state is the most important agenda item -- the control over society, the attempt to manipulate what goes on in that society, and the practice of isolating the opposition with tactics that range from character assassination to imprisonment. Saad did not buy the argument that there were structural reasons behind these things. Anytime people tell you that a problem is structural, they are simply making the problem appear to be the outcome of huge impersonal forces -- that nobody is morally or politically responsible and that the problem cannot be fixed in the foreseeable future. Pointing to structural causes is also a great way to demoralize those who want to engage in struggle.

What happened to those who talked about the bureaucratic-authoritarian Latin American state and who said that Latin American political culture is not conducive to anything except authoritarianism? What did they say after the regimes crumbled under popular pressure? I am not in favor of the notion that there are solid structural conditions that cannot be changed, and, like Saad, I believe there is a yearning for pluralism in our societies. What else can you say about the wide popular interest in the new media, for instance? No matter what you say by way of criticism, Arab attention to it reflects an interest in getting more than one boring, unchanging, official script. People want to move on.

The issue of political inclusion is extremely important. It is also important, though, not to confuse the yearning for civil society institutions with the existence of those institutions. I notice that many of my Arab friends talk about civil society that they say exists in Syria, Iraq, Algeria, and this or that country. Then they go on to describe government restrictions in those countries that are not in any way compatible with the existence of civil society. With this kind of vision, we may end up with civil society that is weak and state structures that are also weak in terms of legitimacy.

The issue of citizenship is equally important. Are we engaged in projects that categorize citizens according to their religion, or are we interested in building modern states in which people are classified according to their sense of belonging to society? In many cases, when ethnic tensions mount, it is easy for some Arab commentators to say that the United States or Israel is behind the trouble, disregarding the impact of regime policies.

Finally, the quality of leadership matters. Saad was impressed with the way Jordan's late King Hussein handled the riots in April 1989. He could have argued that the kingdom was threatened and resorted to what they call al-Hal al-Hamawi, or the "Hama solution," but he did not. King Hussein both understood his society and possessed a vision for its future. The problem is that we increasingly have leaders with modest vision. (Applause.)

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