

# The Arab Predicament, Circa 2002:

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

Oct 4, 2002



In-Depth Reports

Most Arabs believe that the world is busy twenty-four hours a day plotting against them. There is no reason for it. The Arab mind must learn to differentiate between competition, struggle, and conspiracy. Life is full of struggle and competition, but the world certainly is not busy with conspiracy against Arabs.

When we ask whether the Arabs can fix their problems, the next question is who will do it and how. Creating a healthy Arab civil society is of the utmost importance. We need to deal with Arab governments, but the governments of the Arab world are participants in the problems we are discussing today. We need another body to talk to. We need to have civil society. Arab civil society is currently thin and lean; it needs to be strengthened.

I would focus on education as the most important tool for fixing the problems of the Arab world. Most Arab misconceptions are related to education. Intolerance of others in terms of both religion and culture, for example, can be cured through education. Moreover, most of the worthwhile values that need to be planted in the Arab mind and conscience are seeded through education. If we do not want the Arabs to live in a cave set apart from the rest of humanity, if we want them to believe in the universality of science and knowledge, we must begin with the schools and universities. Without full-scale educational reform, there will be no solution.

Earlier in these proceedings, Nabeel Khoury used a term that many of you might find strange. He said that America and the West should encourage secular Muslims. I am sure many of you would ask whether there is such a thing as a secular Muslim. There were secular Muslims in my country, Egypt, for a long while. Historically, there were two models of Islam, one in Turkey and Egypt and another in Arabia.

From 1810 to 1940, Egypt had version of Islam that was either secular or close to secular. Islam was a religion, period. It was not a comprehensive theory for organizing and managing life. For many reasons, the Arabian model had the resources to expand. Most of the problems we have today are related to this model of Islam, not to the Turkey-Egypt model.

The first Saudi monarchy which practiced the Arabian model of Islam was established in 1795. In 1811, Egypt under Muhammad Ali sent its army to destroy this monarchy because Ali did not accept the idea that Islam should be practiced as more than a religion. To him, it was a religion that should be respected like any other, but not as a comprehensive doctrine for life. The Egyptian army went to what was called Nesjd, stayed there for two years, finished the job, and toppled the first Saudi monarchy. For more than 130 years after that victory, secular Islam prevailed in Egypt.

Secular Islam is much thinner today than it was before, but with the proper work we can revive this model. It is a version of Islam that emphasizes education and one that could help the Arabs fix their problems. But all of this requires hard work on the part of the Arab intelligentsia to convince Arabs that their problems were made by Arabs and that only Arabs can provide the cure. (Applause.)

Read remarks by the other participants on this panel: [Rend Rahim Francke. \(templateC07.php?CID=123\) Ibrahim](#)

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