

Is There Hope for the Arab Center?

**Marwan Muasher
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Distinguished members of the Board of Trustees,
President Waterbury,
Distinguished Guests,

There is no greater honor for me than to be here today, addressing this distinguished group from this podium, this beloved university, thirty years after I have left it. I am awed, humbled, extremely elated, and deeply privileged.

I came to AUB as a freshman student in 1972, thirty years after my late father graduated from here in 1942. My wife, my two brothers, my sister, and almost all my cousins went to AUB. I can safely proclaim that we are an AUB family.

As I stand here today, the memories I have of AUB are still fresh in my mind. I still remember walking down Jean D'Arc Street every morning, grabbing a mankousheh from a bakery on Bliss Street, buying a copy of Al-Nahar, getting a cup of coffee from the Milk Bar, sitting outside, and having breakfast while enjoying the sight of the Mediterranean below. I can think of few better ways than to start any morning with.

But AUB is not about manakeesh and a beautiful campus. My generation, as all generations who attended AUB, first came to learn at AUB that truths are not absolute, first realized the need for critical thinking, and first appreciated the power of diversity. AUB graduates always felt they were not just getting an education, but more importantly, acquiring a sense of purpose, a commitment to serve the region, and an urge to open up to the rest of the world. That sense of purpose is truly what binds all AUB alumni together, wherever they are and whatever they do. That is why AUB represents the best of what America can offer in our region. Contrary to the hostility most Arabs feel towards American policies in the region regarding

the Arab-Israeli conflict, AUB is a highly regarded institution in the Arab world by people belonging to the full political, economic and social spectra in our region. It is no coincidence, therefore, that despite all the destruction the civil war visited upon Beirut, the AUB campus was left largely intact by all warring factions.

The Arab World is a wonderful mosaic of different ethnic and religious communities, as well as political ideologies, all sharing the same language, history and civilizations. There are Muslims: Sunnis, Shiites, Druze and other schools of jurisprudence, Christians of all denominations, and Jews. There are Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Circassian, Chechen and Berber. AUB was, and remains, a place that taught us tolerance and appreciation of the other. This great university has served as a bridge between East and West, combining the best of both worlds, and contributing to a better understanding between these two worlds.

But AUB's message of moderation, inclusion and respect for diversity, values that should form the core of the Arab Center today, has not been heeded by most Arab governments in our region. Instead of regarding diversity as a source of strength for these societies, Arab children were taught at a very early age that differences must be suppressed in service of the larger common goals of all Arabs. We taught our children to think monolithically, one-dimensionally. Critical thinking was not valued or encouraged. Truths were always absolute rather than relative. A whole generation was raised on the notion that allegiance to the country meant allegiance to the party, system or leader; that diversity, critical thinking and individual differences were treasonous.

Arab governments, whether conservative or "progressive", have largely resisted political reform. Ad-hoc programs to expand certain political freedoms have been undertaken here and there. But no Arab country at the advent of the new millennium could claim a sustained commitment to political reform. In no Arab country is there a systematic process that would encourage the kind of political and civil development that constitute the necessary infrastructure for a democratic society complete with an evolved system of checks and balances or allow for true accountability and transparency of the political process. The lack of a democratic infrastructure was poignantly clear after the US war on Iraq in 2003. The destruction of the *ancien regime* revealed a shocking vacuum of power. Functioning political parties and a robust civil society could not fill the void simply because they

did not exist. Political groups that had largely operated from the outside the country and religious parties with strong sectarian following stepped in. The post-war disintegration of public order allowed organizations such as Al-Qaeda to find a foothold in Iraq. From there, they have exported terror to the entire region and fuelled internal strife, contributing to the country's slide towards civil war.

Arab governments offered three arguments for not making political development a priority – a policy deficiency that placed the Arab region near the bottom of all the regions of the globe on the democracy scale. First was the Arab-Israeli conflict, which, they contended, rendered all other challenges secondary. This was, essentially, an argument of not being able to walk and chew gum at the same time. Democracy could and should wait thus until a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict brought about fuller stomachs and happier days, the argument went.

After the Iranian revolution and the nascence of political Islam, governments said Islamist parties would be the first – and possibly the last – to emerge through any political opening. They maintained that once Islamist forces assume power through a democratic process, they will never relinquish it. They ignored the uncomfortable fact, that they themselves, whether revolutionary or traditional, never allowed the alternation of power once they grabbed it.

And then they argued that political reforms had to be subordinate to economic reforms until the latter delivered a moderate middle class. That argument ignored the fact that economic reform was unlikely to successfully take hold in the absence of transparency, accountability and a functioning system of checks and balances. So economic reforms have taken place alongside corruption that has discouraged investment and failed, in most instances, to improve peoples' economic well-being or create a sizable middle class. To quote the 2004 UNDP Arab Human Development Report, the argument of “bread before freedom” has practically meant that “most Arabs have risked losing out on both”.

Almost every Arab government has used each of these arguments in varying form. It is an unstated consensus to discourage, if not outright prevent, political party development in Arab countries. Civil society has been reviled in many parts of the Arab region. The patriarchal ruling elite

typically have claimed a monopoly on defining and pursuing the Arab people's interests in nearly every sphere of life.

Today, we are witnessing the grand failure of this policy, to disastrous effect. The ruling elite, unfettered by a free press, opposition parties, or a vibrant civil society, grew increasingly non-transparent over the years. The Transparency International "Corruptions Perceptions Index" of 2005 lists 12 Arab countries (together with the Palestinian Authority) with a score of 70 or more (1 being the best) out of 158 countries included. Their privileges expanded, and their interest in protecting them grew in tandem. Self-aggrandizement superseded loyalty to the state and merit as a virtue. Religious parties stepped in to fill the void created by the suppression of national, democratic, non-religious parties, dominating the public sphere alongside Arab governments and complementing the state's role in public services provision. Unimpeded by countervailing voices, religious groups delivered a resonant message about the efficacy of religion as state. Through their philanthropy and social services, they constructed a broad and deep support base. By the time some Arab regimes began to contemplate political reforms in the early 1990s, religious groups had enjoyed a long head start over other civil society groups, which in any case, had difficulty emerging.

The imposed political inertia that was meant to preserve the status quo for the elites at first, and, later, to "shield" society against radical ideologies produced the opposite: a ruling elite increasingly viewed by Arab publics not as moderate, but as non-accountable, and the ascendancy of religious groups that use Islam for political purposes. Thus, the public grew wary of an elite that ruled without accountability, but was also skeptical of religious groups, some of which promised good governance but also seemed to threaten political and cultural diversity.

There is no question today that the Arab region has lagged behind all others in its political reform process. Scholarly inquiry into why this is so has cited several reasons for this state of affairs; none of them are fully satisfactory. Many analyses have pointed to various aspects of religion. One argument is that Islam is a religion that discourages opposition to the ruler and other democratic norms. This neatly overlooks Islamic scholarship throughout centuries and until today that asserts Islam's emphasis on individual reason and freedom and on the importance of social consensus as values and practices embraced by Islam. Others assert Islam's emphasis on patriarchy, but without ever explaining why Muslim societies should be any

more trapped by patriarchal rule than Western Christian societies were in past centuries.

Arguments that cite religion as the cause for retarded political development overlook the contemporary evidence. Millions of Muslims today live in democratic societies. Indonesia, the largest Islamic country, Turkey and Malaysia are all examples of Islamic countries with clearly established democratic norms and vibrant political societies.

To state it succinctly, cultural determinism has barely shed light on the state of affairs in the Arab world. A more pragmatic investigation might take into account instead the failures of educational systems in the Arab World in the last century. Curricula continued to encourage submission, obedience, subordination and compliance, rather than free critical thinking -- yielding generations reluctant to criticize political or social axioms.

Undeniably, the continuation of the Israeli occupation of Arab and Palestinian territories has been a major impediment to overall development, including political development. The security imperative has channeled vast resources into military expenditures that could otherwise have been deployed elsewhere. At the same time, leaders have used it as an excuse – in some instances more legitimately than others – not to reform. In some instances, Arab governments argued that the combination of democracy and conflict would bring to the fore radical elements who would exploit public emotions to radicalize the whole region and, ultimately, widen the conflict. In fact, it is precisely the failure to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict that has allowed radical movements to flourish by exploiting the emotions of those who have been aggrieved by the conflict. Their growth has made peace more difficult to achieve than it might have been even ten years ago. But the Arab-Israeli conflict cannot account for the appalling state of women's rights, for example, or the inattention to good, transparent governance.

Oil has also been a major factor. In both the countries that possess it and the countries that export their labor to oil-producing states, it has meant the easy accumulation of wealth. Economic prosperity has diluted the need and the demand for political reform, and, because of oil, the West has regarded stability, not reform, in the Middle East as its number one priority.

These have not been the only impediments to reform. One must admit that the post-colonial nationalist political parties that emerged have not been

democratic. They prioritized nation-building over democracy, ignoring the fact that democratic norms are the pillars of nation-building. Dissent was decried as disloyalty – to Arab causes, to the state or to the party. The culture of allegiance – in monarchies and republics – meant that diversity was a bad word. In both systems, ideologies or ideas that did not conform to the prevailing cults of personality were discouraged when possible, repressed when necessary.

How can we move forward? Opposing elections or postponing them indefinitely are no longer sustainable options. The best option that seems to be available is for the Arab world to gradually but seriously open up its political system while continuing to hold elections. But in order to ensure that no side feels threatened by a zero-sum game, two principal rules should be agreed to and adhered to by all those who want to engage in political activity:

1. Commitment to political and cultural diversity: To prevent any party – whether religious or secular – from using its power to monopolize cultural, political and social life, each Arab society must arrive at a national consensus in which all parties commit to political and cultural diversity under all circumstances, and would legally prevent any group from denying the right to organize for other groups. Majority rule, but also, minority rights. That is a key element of the culture of democracy. This principle was explicitly stated in the Jordanian National Agenda, for example.

2. Commitment to peaceful means: All political parties or individuals should also commit to pursuing their objectives through peaceful means. That means that parties participating in the system cannot also bear arms. Violence against civilians cannot be acceptable under any conditions, nor can support for those who commit such acts of violence. That is incitement, not freedom of speech. Incitement must be specifically and narrowly defined by legislation so that the state cannot use such legislation for repressive purposes. That commitment was also explicitly stated in the Jordanian National Agenda.

If these two principles are adhered to in good faith and become part of the national culture, Arabs would take a long stride towards true political development – by which I mean the practice of -- and respect for -- the peaceful rotation of power. It will not happen in a day. But it can happen.

The other components of good governance also must be given immediate attention. Corruption, human rights abuses and circumscribed freedoms must be addressed by first amending the legal environment. But it is also important to ensure that respect for human rights and freedoms and fighting corruption become values that are part of the national political culture.

And last, but certainly not least, is the intellectual fortification of our children. The Arab world has made important strides in eradicating illiteracy and educating its citizens. But our focus has been largely on quantity, not quality education – in science, technology, civics and other liberal disciplines. It is more important than ever that our curricula teach values of tolerance, diversity and respect for the other as sources of strength, not weakness for society. And, the continual improvements we make to the physical infrastructure of education is for naught, unless we also make a much greater investment in the human infrastructure of our schools and universities. Training, continuing education and other forms of support for our teachers is vital, and without it, reforms in every other area will be meaningless.

That leads us to a very important question: Given these failed policies by Arab governments, moderate and radical alike, does an Arab political center even exist? And is it effective and credible in the Arab public eye? There is no doubt that the emergent threat of extremism, highlighted by September 11, illuminated a new shared Arab interest and a challenge that could only be met by bringing about an end to regional conflict beginning with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which lies at its heart. Saudi Arabia's decision to take a more active role in the process, coupled with Egypt and Jordan's peace treaties with Israel, effectively created a critical mass of Arab countries with enough weight in the Arab and Muslim worlds as well as in the West. A new Arab core thus emerged, one that was now both moderate and pro-active and in addition one that enjoyed good relations with the international community in general, and the West and the United States in particular. The new troika of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, which replaced the old troika of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria, immediately started coordination to advance a two-state solution to the conflict through efforts such as the Arab Peace Initiative and the Middle East Road Map.

That such an Arab Center exists is something beyond doubt. It is a center that has been pro-active in recent years in attempting to find a

solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict that would satisfy both sides. Indeed, most of the political initiatives of the last five years – most notably the Arab Peace Initiative and the Road Map – have been initiated by that center to break the existing deadlock and push the peace process forward.

Yet, today its moderation and dynamism are at risk, simply because despite its honorable effort to bring moderation in the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to resolve it, its major shortcoming is in fact that this center has focused singularly on the peace process. In short, it is a one issue center.

The Arab public must be convinced that a pro-active, pragmatic Arab discourse is not limited to the peace process, but also extends to other concerns of the Arab street: good governance, economic well-being and inclusive decision-making. Arab regimes erratic approach to reform has compromised the credibility of both their domestic and foreign policies, especially where the latter concerns the peace process. Certainly, the three Arab countries collaborating on peace efforts have yet to do that on these other issues, and in fact sometimes hold different and opposing views on them. Loss of credibility on addressing peoples' daily lives issues has thus extended to a loss of credibility of the moderate policies of the Arab Center vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict. Many Arabs thus came to view the pragmatic positions of the Arab Center as compromising Arab interests in the service of Western powers, rather than attempting to end the Israeli occupation, establish a viable Palestinian state and bring much needed stability and prosperity to the region.

If the Arab Center is to be finally triumphant, and shake the image its opponents try to paint for it as an apologist for the west or a compromiser of Arab rights, it must start planting the seeds for a time when the peace process will end and the challenge of a robust, diverse, tolerant, democratic and prosperous Arab society remains.

Thank you.