Introduction

Dilemmas of democratisation in the Middle East

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Democracy has been on the agenda in the Arab world for several dec-
ades, most particularly in the 1960s and 1970s when it was propagated
by progressive and secular national opposition movements and parties
– only to find no support in the West which, during the cold war, could
only conceive of one enemy, the Communists or Socialists. Instead, the
West supported and armed one authoritarian and repressive regime after
another, shipping weapons of mass destruction and logistics to dictators.
Socialists and pan-Arabists were seen as threatening elements, while
the rising fundamentalists were considered a harmless counterweight.
In the case of Afghanistan, however, the fundamentalists or Islamists
were militarised and globalised by the West and set against the invading
Soviet troops who were finally defeated and withdrew, leaving behind
them tens of thousands of unemployed Mujahedeen eager for new
exploits. A snake had been fostered at the imperial breast.

When the Islamists turned against their former sponsors and mas-
ters, democracy suddenly became the buzzword in the Western cor-
ridors of power, from whence it aimed more at foes than at friends in
the Middle East. However, the creation of a Western style democracy,
i.e. one man – and woman! – one vote in the Middle East, might lead
to political structures different from the malleable and compliant ones
favoured by the West. The long decades of despotism, corruption, and
nepotism made it very likely that such a democracy would produce what
the West now despised and feared most of all, an Islamist anti-Western
nationalist regime.

Nevertheless the majority of Arabs (61 percent according to World

Values Survey in five Arab countries, Algeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Morocco) favour democracy over other political systems, which is a higher percentage than that found in 16 European countries and by far exceeds the figures in the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Yet it is the West that wants to export democracy to the Arab world in general and to the Middle East in particular, be it the American "Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative" or the Danish "Wider Middle East Initiative". Both initiatives were inspired by the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 but are not designed in such a way as to fulfil the democratic aspirations of the Arab peoples.

One of the mistakes of the West has been a tendency to consider the Arab world a static entity that should be pushed – by military or economic means – towards democracy. And one of the mistakes of the Arab world has been to blame everything on others, be it the US, the West in general, or Israel in particular. The essays in this book transcend both of these erroneous views and deal instead with both the external and the internal forces that are impeding or promoting democracy in the Arab world.

The new Western mantra demanding democracy has often been met with multiple accusations of double standards: "Why in Iraq and not in Saudi Arabia?"; "Why should Syria comply with the UN resolutions and not Israel?" and "Why is the latter allowed to have weapons of mass destruction and not the Arab countries?" Often raised yet never answered, these questions are on every Arab citizen's mind, and no plan for democracy and no amount of money can do away with them; at the end of the day they will have to be answered adequately and justly. Therefore it is out of the question to put the issue of the occupation of Iraq and Palestine aside and go ahead with business as usual with other Arab countries – as was the initial plan of, for example, the Danish government. No matter how forthcoming their leaders are, the people still demand justice and, surprisingly to some, no matter how dictatorial the leaders might be, their people still hold them accountable to some degree at least. Even a dictator has to listen to the street.

Furthermore the Arab world is, in its own fragmented way, still an entity. Men and women in the streets of Rabat or Damascus do feel an

affiliation and empathy with the men and women in the ruins of Falluja or Jenin. The daily injustices imposed upon these people by their own rulers are repeated in the evening on TV, which shows pictures of occupation soldiers kicking in doors in Mosul or Ramallah.

Yet although the countries of the Middle East are changing, politically driven by internal forces, these current reform processes face a number of challenges. Internally, political opposition parties and factions, dissidents and NGOs are subject to varying degrees of control and containment by regimes whose popular legitimacy remains limited. While some of the regimes have started a dialogue with reform-oriented organisations and political factions, it remains to be seen whether this will generally result in comprehensive and enduring reforms and popular participation.

Furthermore, external actors – particularly the United States and to some degree Europe – are seeking influence on the political landscape of the Middle East, based on the notion that promoting democracy is the key to stability and prosperity in the region. However, these efforts are mistrusted by large sections of the Arab public, particularly in the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq. Therefore the question is whether the approach represented by the West is appropriate and, if not, what alternatives are available.

In early February 2005 The Plum Foundation arranged a conference in Copenhagen in order to present "a view from the Middle East" on the dilemmas of democratisation in the area. The conference brought together a number of independent experts from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Palestine, as well as a few Western scholars who for decades have been doing research, not only in and about the Arab world, but also among Muslims in Europe. The authors all focus on the challenges and possibilities arising from the latest developments in the region and the world at large. This anthology reflects the ideas and analyses presented at the conference and the chapters provide a broad and nuanced picture of the dilemmas of democratisation in the Middle East.

The main aim of the book is to provide a forum for opinions held by Arabs who are neither Western puppets nor fanatical nationalists or Islamists, but rather academics with a vast knowledge of the Middle East as well as of the West. The authors all support the building

of a democratic secular Middle East, but their writings also show that although there is no easy way to achieve this goal, there are likewise no easy excuses for not making the attempt.

The book could be seen as complementary to the latest *Arab Human Development Report* and, as such, a much needed antidote to the sea of unfounded optimism as to the democratic outcome of the war in Iraq, as well as to the outcome of the various Middle Eastern "peace" initiatives.

In the first chapter *Nader Fergany* – the lead author of the *Arab Human Development Reports* – deals with the findings of these reports. Present Arab regimes have failed to deliver the goods to which the Arab people aspire both in terms of freedom – in the broadest sense of the word – and good governance, as well as concerning the minimum definition of development, namely economic growth. Nader Fergany outlines the future scenarios that are open to the Arab world, 1) a continuation of the status quo, i.e. "the impending disaster scenario"; recent developments in Egypt seem to confirm this viewpoint. 2) "The *épanouissement* scenario" with a redistribution of power, building of good governance, total respect of the key freedoms of opinion, expression and assembly, which again would lead to a higher level of civil participation. 3) Realistically speaking, however, this third scenario might lie somewhere between these two extremes. In Fergany's view there is no contradiction between Islam and freedom, and outside military interference, as in the case of Iraq, is counterproductive because one cannot liberate a people by depriving them of national liberation.

In chapter 2 *Raymond Hinnebusch*, professor of International Relations and Middle East Politics at the University of St. Andrews, discusses the structural conditions for democratisation in the Middle East. A secure national identity is often considered a prerequisite for democratisation, but the Arab states have struggled with borders being arbitrarily imposed on them rather than being congruent with local identity. Therefore loyalty to tribe and sect as well as to supra-state identities (Arabism, Islam) has competed powerfully with loyalty to the state, and overcoming this disunity – rather than establishing democracy – has been given priority by the leaders of these weak states. The same is true of the main popular political movements – pan-Arabists and political

Islamists – that have also been preoccupied with identity, unity and authenticity rather than democratisation. Where these movements have seized state power, state-building has often taken an authoritarian form. Hinnebusch argues that the international context is of utmost importance and – because of the pro-American policy of several Arab states – this has mainly been an impediment to democratisation, because it deprives the rulers of the national legitimacy which would allow them to risk democratisation.

In chapter 3 *Yezid Sayigh* draws on his experience as a consultant to the international donor community in Palestine in discussing how to translate talk about abstract or universalised concepts – such as accountability and democracy – into concrete policy and operational recommendations that are relevant to specific contexts with all their attendant political, legal-administrative, and constitutional legacies and social, economic, and cultural characteristics. Sayigh emphasises that the real concern is whether the fundamental changes can be achieved peacefully and "without imposing agendas and objectives that directly threaten the core values, ideals, and autonomy of other peoples". The chapter pinpoints the tendency of the West to extol outward or superficial aspects of a democratic process, e.g. elections, whereas the real problem lies in the proximity between those holding economic power and those holding military and political power, as well as the problem of the powerlessness of parliaments. Nor has economic aid to a country like Egypt, for instance, produced any democratic improvement; and, moreover, the heavily-promoted economic liberalisation policies tend to undermine democratisation. The role of the West concerning democracy in the Middle East can only be one of doing "least harm" whereas the crucial role can be played only by local democracy advocates and reformers.

In chapter 4 the Syrian scholar and dissident, *Samir Aita*, starts his essay with a brief overview of Syrian history since independence, under the simple but arresting headline "In the very beginning, there was democracy". The year 1963 delivered the *coup de grace* to an unstable democratic period and the present state of emergency in Syria was initiated in March of that year with the establishment of Baath rule. From 1970 until 2000 the Syrian power system was in the hands of President Hafez Asad.

After Asad's death in 2000 there ensued what Nader Fergany calls a "republican dynasty" marked by the ascent to power of Asad's son, Bashar. In his inaugural speech the young president mentioned the word democracy 16 times and thus gave hope to the Syrian intellectuals who launched the "Damascus Spring" in September 2000 with petitions and "salons" debating every aspect of Syrian social, economic and political life. A year later the regime cracked down on the most notable activists and put an end to the spring, although less brutally than in the past.

According to Aita, there are several components that constitute the basis of a sustainable democratic development: political parties; the relations between the State and the power system; the positioning of the business community; and, dealing with Islam – in particular radical Islam. The author guides the reader through the very intricate Syrian power web that guarantees weak state institutions and concentrates control and strength in the closed circles around the president. One of the key mistakes committed by the West is its inability to distinguish between the state and the power system. The same mistake was committed in Iraq when the US dismantled the state institutions.

British journalist *Graham Usher* who, for more than a decade, has covered developments in the Middle East from his base in Jerusalem analyses the current Palestinian struggle for democracy in chapter 5. This struggle, says Usher, takes place within "two contending, though still essentially modern notions of democracy: democracy as a vehicle of imposed reform and neo-colonial containment versus democracy as an instrument for popular empowerment and national liberation". The author lists various causes for the present crisis, namely the collapse of the Oslo peace process, the defeat of the second intifada, and Israel's unilateralism, i.e. the separation barrier and the disengagement plan. The Palestinian crisis itself has several components which include the concurrent crises of strategy, leadership, governance and legitimacy.

The Palestinian struggle for genuine democratic reforms has gone unsupported by either USA or Israel, because they both primarily regard "reform" to mean regime change. Thus, "The Americans, through Bush's 'vision' and the roadmap, hijacked the domestic Palestinian demand for democratic change and turned it into a means for containing the conflict and removing an elected, historical but insufficiently pliant leader".

Recent Palestinian elections have tilted the issue of democracy away from the US/Israeli conception of democracy as regime-change and conflict containment and back in favour of the Palestinians who view it as a means "not simply to improve governance, but fundamentally to build a society necessary for strengthening the Palestinian capacity to resist".

In chapter 6 *Hanan Rabbani*, Palestinian consultant for Amnesty International, deals with development aid as a new form of colonialism because of the increasing tendency to attach political strings to any kind of aid given, most particularly by the US. Rabbani writes: "Funding by the USAID programme has increasingly become conditional: Support for any Palestinian non-governmental organisation involves checking the history of every person on the board of trustees of the concerned organisation. This investigation is done in search of any political or social links or connections to anybody involved with Hamas". Recipient Palestinian NGOs are also required to sign a document denouncing "terrorism". Another side effect of this type of development aid has been that "many Arab NGOs started implementing meaningless projects for the sake of acquiring the funds, and these projects did not leave a long-lasting positive impact on the lives of women and other marginalised sectors in the society". Much time and money has been wasted not only in satisfying the donors' conditions for aid but also because of the donors' lack of understanding of Palestinian culture and conditions. Hanan Rabbani illustrates these claims with several cases. The author believes that as long as Arab NGO's remain financially dependent on European and other Western funding it is unrealistic to expect equal partnership based on mutual respect, exchange of experiences and cooperation.

However, Hanan Rabbani does not confine herself to simply criticising the West, but also acknowledges the marginalisation of Arab women due to the inability of the patriarchal Arab regimes to advance the position of women. She advocates in the end of her essay the importance of strengthening the Arab women's movement.

In chapter 7 *Mai Yamani*, (Saudi Arabia), research fellow with the Middle East Programme at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, argues that democracy means different things for the

ordinary people in the area and for the US. For the Saudi rulers the question is "how to play the *game* of democracy". But the Saudi population – in an age of globalisation – knows that the rulers are "inefficient, corrupt and unable to offer leadership".

The Saudi rulers attempt to comply with external and internal demands for democracy by *partial* elections, where women and other groups are excluded. There was a general low voter registration and turnout, but this could be used to support the Saudi regime's claim that "the population is satisfied with the status quo". The elections do not mean a redistribution of power, but the regime is under mounting pressure from its own people and from the surrounding countries which have at least chosen a token democracy. "The more that there is talk about democracy with no tangible results, the more the anger and frustration. This anger is often expressed against America but it is really against the regimes themselves".

The Saudi people have lived for decades under the old "unspoken agreement: the state paid for everything and told them nothing. No taxation, no information". This situation prevented the development of any notion of accountability or transparency. By outlawing all kinds of civil liberties in Saudi Arabia "the ruling elite did not eliminate pluralism nor dissent but instead sent it underground and onto the worldwide web. Hundreds of these web sites exist; the most extreme preaching the ideas of al-Qaida and its ideological brothers".

According to Mai Yamani the ruling family has to establish a leadership and enter into dialogue with the people "with the explicit purpose of finding a new story of Saudi Arabia that has to be modern and aware of global trends. The story has to be inclusive of people that now feel so estranged".

In chapter 8 the Saudi sociologist *Fowziyah Abu-Khalid* opens her essay by stressing that, "the Palestinian issue is a key question for reaching an objective understanding of the region. It represents a personal as well as a national importance for most Arabs in order to be engaged in a productive dialogue with the West. Without realising and acknowledging the real meaning of a continuous and unjust situation of the Palestinian people it will be a mere illusion to see a constructive relationship between the West and the Arab world".

The author questions the intentions of the Western plans for democracy in the Middle East: "Are they based on understanding and recognition of the cultural values of the targeted society or are they based on superiority complex of one version of history which is the Western history?" From there Fowziyah Abu-Khalid proceeds to specify the internal dilemmas of Saudi Arabia today, i.e. the political structure of the country, the absence of freedom of speech, the denial of multiplicity, the invisibility of women and the absence of a codified legal system.

The chapter ends by quoting the petition presented in 2003 by a number of Saudi activists and academics to the then Crown Prince Abdullah, listing a number of suggestions and recommendations for political reforms in Saudi Arabia.

In chapter 9 *Amal Shlash* from Iraq presents the factors behind the democratisation deficiency in Iraq and provides some broad suggestions on how to overcome existing challenges.

Iraq is today one of the poorest countries in the region in spite of the fact that, because of its natural resources, it used to be one of the richest and most industrialised countries in the Middle East. The oil sector totally dominates Iraq's economy constituting 74 percent of its GDP, and the country depends entirely on oil export for financing investment and consumption expenditures.

Another main challenge is the necessity of changing the role of the state in Iraq, making way for a pluralisation of the political system and a transition from a centralised planned economy towards market economy. In the past the distinctive characteristic of the Iraqi economy was the excessive role of the state and the weakness of the private sector.

In order to find a way through these challenges the author suggests that firstly, major attention should be given on all levels inside and outside Iraq to the building of human capital through education, including technical and scientific education, and through the encouragement of a spirit of enquiry inside the educational institutions. Secondly, the income disparities should be reduced through a process of development geared to job creation. This requires the serious building of a new private sector in Iraq, including encouraging the establishment of private organisations. Thirdly, closing the gender gap will be necessary

in trying to solve the development problems and to increase political participation. Fourthly, after being isolated for the last 25 years, the Iraqi economy needs to be reintegrated into the global economy.

Amal Shlash concludes by stating that if democracy is to take root in Iraq, it must be built primarily by Iraqis in response to specific Iraqi conditions and needs.

In chapter 10 *Huda Al-Nu'aimi* states that the decision of the occupying power to dismantle the Iraqi state contributed to the spreading of chaos and has deprived the country of security and stability. Another fatal result is the explosion of cultural, ethnic, and sectarian divisions in the country, which formerly was one of the most secular societies in the Middle East but is now witnessing an upsurge in political Islam within both the Sunni- and Shi'a communities. This development constitutes a dangerous outcome for democracy in Iraq.

Another key question is what kind of system the future Iraqi state should have, whether Iraq should adopt a presidential or parliamentary system, and where should the decision-making power lie? The author ends by listing specific demands that should be met in order to secure the future rights of Iraqi women.

The main emphasis of this chapter is on the role of women in all spheres of Iraqi life, and Huda al-Nu'aimi specifies the political, civil, economic, educational and social rights of women in the future Iraqi society.

Several of the authors have stressed European responsibility for democratisation in the Middle East. And this issue is never more acute than in the discussion of Islamophobia in Europe, the subject in chapter 11, by Professor *Jørgen S. Nielsen*, newly-appointed director of the Danish Institute in Damascus. The author distinguishes between the East-European indigenous Muslims and the immigrants in Western Europe coming out of a very different historical background, namely immigrations into Europe along the routes of the old imperial relations between Europe and its colonies.

The younger immigrant generations have claimed their place in the public space but, as the 1990s went on, the discourse of fear of refugees and asylum seekers was increasingly overlaid with a discourse about Muslims. After the collapse of the Soviet empire, Muslims increas-

ingly came to play the role as the "enemy" or the "other". Particularly after 9/11 it became clear that "where politicians in the past could sell themselves with visions they now sell themselves with responses to fear, i.e. protecting people against the imaginary dangers outside".

Among Muslims in Europe there has also been a growing apprehension concerning the intentions of the West. Jørgen S. Nielsen points to the irony that "Huntington is now nowhere more popular and more acknowledged than in parts of Arab and Muslim society. There is almost a mirror image between Huntington's "clash of civilisations" idea and political Islamism".

The question of the loyalty of Muslim and other minority communities within Europe is a question of give and take and of their being included in all aspects of social life. According to Jørgen S. Nielsen, "one of the most important things that European countries and societies can do is to leave as much breathing space as possible for Muslims and other immigrant groups, whether they define themselves as Muslims or something else is in this sense beside the point. They should be given space to work out for themselves how to integrate functionally within their new society. The vast majority want to integrate, and in my experience find very constructive ways of doing so without assimilating".

It goes without saying that the multifaceted historical, social and cultural map of the Middle East cannot be contained in eleven chapters; neither can its seemingly insurmountable problems. Yet the knowledge and experience contained in this book paves the way for a far more fertile and respectful platform for a future cooperation between political actors in the Middle East, the EU and the US. After reading this book there are no more excuses for continuing along the path of futile piecemeal plans and projects because it will no longer be possible to say that "we didn't know".