

The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East

by Barry Rubin, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2006, 296 pp.

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For those who support the democratisation of the Middle East, these are dark times indeed. In Iraq, the intended cornerstone of this policy, bloodshed and sectarianism seems to be gathering momentum at an alarming pace. One should not forget that the removal of Saddam Hussein is still supported by the overwhelming majority of Iraqis. Nevertheless, the contending ethnic and religious forces that have been released may yet push the country into civil war.

Democracy – without the accoutrements of pluralism, stable government and the rule of law – has not yet provided the general panacea that many hoped for. Moreover, the evidence would suggest that the malady is not specific to Iraq. In the Palestinian Authority, the main beneficiaries of democratic elections have been Hamas, a party whose very reason for existence seems to preclude the possibility of living in peace with its nearest neighbour.

Until recent weeks, Lebanon had seemed to provide one important point of contrast. For the author of the book under review it represented the possibility of an alternative future, with a burgeoning democratic movement, committed to shaking off Syrian influence. Those in the West who are eager to present Hezbollah as the genuine voice of the Lebanese people greatly overestimate their standing prior to the outbreak of the current crisis. Last year, in Lebanon's first free general election in decades, Hezbollah and its allies won 14 out of the 27 seats allocated to the Shi'ite community, in the 128-seat national assembly. In other words, despite being the best-funded and best-armed organisation in the contest, some 89 percent of the Lebanese population, including half of the Shi'ite community, did not share their vision of an Islamic state, committed to a ruinous war.

Now, much of the south of the country and the capital, Beirut, stands in ruins. When the dust settles, the nascent Lebanese democracy is likely to be as vulnerable as ever. Hezbollah, the scourge of the so-called Cedar Revolution and the spark for the conflict, is once more able to place itself on the pedestal of a freedom fighting force, an emblem for the cause of liberation. Meanwhile, one sponsor, President

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Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's regime in Tehran, has used the smokescreen of the international crisis to exert an even stronger grip on sources of domestic dissent and muzzle a youthful, multi-ethnic and restless population in Iran. The other sponsor, Prince Assad's Syria, sees the opportunity to re-assert the poisonous influence that the Lebanese people shook off a year ago.

Voices from within

Barry Rubin's book was written before the latest Middle East crisis but it can only be reviewed in the light of it. It is a study of the small group of liberals and democrats in the Arab world who continue to strive for political freedom and democratic reform across a number of states. In many places, this is a story of great bravery and a struggle against the odds. But for Rubin – a columnist for the *Jerusalem Post* and the Director of the Global Research Centre in Herzilya, Israel – the purpose is not to emote. Instead, he has a serious intellectual point to make, which has strategic implications for how the West frames its approach to the Middle East.

Rubin's central thesis is that we are wrong to see the struggle for the future of Middle East as a simple two-way fight between 'hardliners' and 'reformers.' Instead, he aims to demonstrate the complex and nationally specific interrelationships between rulers (dynastic, theocratic, or secular authoritarian), Islamic radicals and reformers in each Arab country.

The book provides an important corrective to the tendency of many to see recent clashes between 'Western' and 'Arab' values in simplistic and teleological terms: the inevitable result of a destructive conflict between irreconcilable versions of history, ideology, culture and religion. For Rubin, the real clash of civilisations is the one that is taking place within the Arab world (p. 31). By revisiting the internal intellectual debates in the Arab world which took place between the 1920s and 1950s – a period in which the portents for democracy were good – he overturns the notion that there was some sort of irreversible trajectory to the polarised world we now find ourselves in.

Egypt, he reminds us, was an electoral democracy (however imperfect) at a time when Spain, Germany and Italy were ruled by fascism and the Soviet Union by communism. 'Nobody talked about Islam or the character of Arab society as preventing the rise of democracy' until more recent developments. Indeed, Rubin makes the case that 'it is quite reasonable to see radical Arab nationalism and

Islamism as the Arab world's equivalents to what communism and fascism were for the West: oppressive systems posing as agents of revolutionary change but in fact arising from a reactionary rejection of modern liberal democratic society.' A self-referential narrative, which grew from ignominious military defeat, featured heavily in both cases (pp. 16-19).

While the focus is on the Arab world, one would have liked to hear more from Rubin about Turkey (mentioned once in the index, although it appears more in the text), where the leading Islamic party has embraced and upheld the democratic process under which it was able to form a government. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation and a successful open democracy, is not mentioned at all.

Debunking the Cold War analogy

In formulating a policy for the Middle East, Rubin does not dispense with the notion that we must 'join the dots of all this round the world,' as the Prime Minister has recently reasserted. But he does insist that, in formulating a general policy, we should be aware of the unique circumstances of each country in the region: ethnic and religious tensions, indigenous social customs, and the socio-economic composition of the nation. The problems remain familiar: the lack of democracy, pluralism, civil society and simple human rights. That does not mean, however, that there is a single solution that can be applied across the board.

On this basis, Rubin is mildly critical of the Bush administration's tendency to draw simplistic analogies between the modern Middle East and post-World War Two Germany and Japan. The effect has been to underestimate the power of alternative forces, such as nationalism, tribalism and religion. These provide a potentially deadly challenge, leading many to associate democracy with the 'imperialism' of the West (p. 34).

Similarly, one should be guarded in reapplying the self-congratulatory Berlin Wall logic, which seemed to suggest that freedom and democracy will taken on an irreversible momentum of their own, once they are given an opening: the idea that one hole in the damn would be enough to allow the waters of freedom to come bursting through. 'The Cold War analogy is unhelpful,' agrees George Packer (a former supporter of the Iraq war but a vocal critic of the direction of US foreign policy since) in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*, because it allows us 'to make a virtue of our ignorance.' This eagerness to settle upon a 'grand, overarching "narrative" of

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anti-totalitarianism,' Packer argues, in a critique of the liberal interventionism of Peter Beinart, 'substitutes will for understanding.'

On the one hand, Rubin's contribution to this debate may be welcomed by some as a corrective to a policy that has sometimes seemed utopian and uncritical in its rhetoric and ambitions. An emphasis on 'regime change,' in any but the most specific case, allows too many hostages to fortune. If the spread of democracy is to be taken seriously, it requires the full range of resources – intellectual, financial, multi-lateral – applied across an extended period of time. Ultimately, this is a generational rather than a military battle.

On the other hand, uncritical deference to those who claim 'local expertise' has led us a long way into the mess we are now. In the making of British foreign policy, this premium on local expertise has at times been used as a proxy for inaction at best, and murky accommodations with tyrannical regimes at worst. In professing to speak for 'the Arab Street,' the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has often preferred to bolster and accommodate its 'allies' in a number of Arab states, largely turning a blind eye to human rights abuses and evidence of domestic tyranny.

In urging caution about the immediate and short-term impact of democratisation, then, one should not lose sight of the long-term realities. Recent elections did not create Hamas, or indeed the phenomenon of resurgent political Islamism in Egypt and across the Middle East. It was the lack of open, accountable government, freedom and the right to dissent that made the mosque or the militias the only alternative source of expression. The West was as complicit in that process as it has been in its more recent attempts, however hubristic, to set the Arab world on an alternative path of development.

Reform from within

Understandably, the most seductive option is for reform to come from within, in an orderly, top-down reconfiguration. In practice, however, this often means that we continue to provide a blank cheque to the 'friendly' regimes, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, at the expense of genuine reformers. Thus far, this approach has produced a series of straw men – who present themselves as exponents of gradual change – of which Syria's Prince Bashar al-Assad is the most recent example. 'Assad-licking,' in the memorable phrase of David Aaronovitch, has yet to provide a sustainable alternative.

Rubin insists that there is a third way, articulated by reformers and democrats. The problem is that the exponents of this alternative path of development are currently at the bottom of the heap, by a long distance. To that end, the book remains depressingly realistic about the difficulties faced by these reformers. On reaching the conclusion, the reader will not be surprised to find himself greeted with 'a thousand and one difficulties' (pp. 228-53).

First among these is the sensitive issue about how we judge our relationship with the exponents of reform and democracy who operate within the states under discussion. Financial and intellectual support remains crucial for prominent liberals such as Saad Ibrahim or Tarek Heggy to have their say in the debate over the future of the region. But there is also a danger that we undermine their potential support base by hugging them too close; in their own countries, the most effective argument used against the reformers is that they are simply a guise for the interests of the West. Moreover, following the spectacular demise of Ahmad Chalabi as 'the voice' of the anti-Saddam Iraqi resistance, many supporters of democracy will be wary of producing a 'straw man' of their own.

The ultimate conundrum is that the reformers – unlike their counterparts in many parts of Asia or in previous periods of history – have to think twice about the desirability of overturning dictatorial regimes under which they operate. In all their dealings, the spectre of populist extremism is always on the horizon. The example of revolutionary Iran echoes throughout the region. In most cases, it is the religious radicals who are best placed to take advantage of any forthcoming power vacuum. Rubin navigates this double-edged sword expertly, with a particular emphasis on the strength of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as the most likely beneficiaries of democratisation.

The result is a more pessimistic prognosis than that provided in Natan Sharansky's *The Case for Democracy*. Rubin does not dismiss the power of freedom to overcome tyranny and terror but his point is that many, in the West and the Arab world, fear that freedom will bring extremists to power or induce a prolonged period of chaos and anarchy. His vision is not without hope. Change along liberal democratic lines is not 'impossible' but remains 'very hard' to achieve and will take what he describes, a little vaguely, as 'a full historical era' (pp. 228-53). 'The West took more than 100 years to reach a decent level of democracy,' argues Fahmi Huweidi, an Egyptian with Islamist sympathies, quoted in the conclusion of the book: 'Why then do they expect us to attain democracy overnight?' (p. 228).

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Britain's role

Both realists and idealists have to embrace two crucial facts. The first is that rapid and irreversible changes are going to transform the Middle East over the next generation. A striking two-thirds of people in the Arab world are younger than twenty-five: many of them are unemployed and disillusioned. New sources of information such as satellite television and the internet have led to an unprecedented proliferation of opinion and challenges to constituted authority. Seismic social, religious, and geo-political shifts are at work across the region. Any foreign policy that aims to maintain the 'status quo' is therefore predicated on an illusion. The Middle East will change immeasurably over the next generation and there are many paths on which it may proceed.

The second is that these changes are not likely to take place on a model that rhymes too closely with the values of the West. To revise the Cold War analogy, for example, we find that nationalism as much as democratic idealism can be a driving force against totalitarianism. The strength of ethnic feeling among peoples such as the Iraqi Kurds or the Ahwazi Arabs of Iran can provoke alarm among those who prefer a civic understanding of freedom; accepting demands for federalism and devolution is often fraught with dangers. But 'the attractiveness of democracy for ethnic and communal groups' may yet, as Rubin argues, be the 'secret weapon' of the reformers (pp. 246-7). Alternatively, the support of Ayatilla al-Sistani (the controversial Shi'ite cleric) for the Iraqi elections may yet provide the most telling contribution to democracy across the region. Democracy, maybe, but not as we know it.

What role then for Britain in these future struggles? For those who opposed the idea that the Middle East was ready for democracy, the 'I told you so' moment they claim to have anticipated has arrived. The Prime Minister stands by his policy bravely. To confront the 'arc of extremism' across the region is, he believes, a difficult path to take but the right one and the only one available to the West in the long-term. Yet he cuts an increasingly lonely figure. The reality is that we are approaching the post-Blair era. The first priority of his successors, Labour or Conservative, will be to draw a line under his foreign policy. In both parties, his most vociferous opponents are positioning themselves against those who believe that the Prime Minister, for all his faults, has broadly 'got it right' in his foreign policy.

How far the anti-Blair reaction will go is the defining question facing Britain on the political horizon. There will not be another Iraq. But what future for the ideals and

principles that went with the decision to topple Saddam Hussein? If we believe the most cynical commentators there never were any ideals. If we follow the route of the liberal sceptic, our only option is to return, tail between legs, to the comforting world of multi-lateral discourse and an ineffective and unreformed UN. If, most worryingly, we retreat behind the mantras of 'realism,' one can expect a return to a conservative pessimist approach to our role in the world, discounting the idea that Britain can project its values in a positive sense.

Exactly where democracy-promotion – support for liberals and reformers beyond the confines of our own state – will rank in the list of priorities remains to be seen. In the fight to draw the line under the Blair era, we should think twice before we throw the baby out with the bath water.

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