



WHAT'S WRONG: THE ARAB LIBERAL CRITIQUE OF ARAB SOCIETY

By Barry Rubin*

Arab liberals have become vocal critics of their societies in recent years, making the question of democracy one of the most important issues facing the Middle East. But what do the reformers actually say about the problems facing their countries and the shortcomings in the current systems there? This article presents the key arguments of the liberals, and those opposing them, showing both their common analysis and the different viewpoints or strategies making up the reform movement.

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The Arab liberals' most impressive achievement has been to provide a thoroughgoing critique of what is wrong with Arab society. This is such a persuasive indictment that it is critical to remember it is also one relatively hardly heard in an Arab world flooded by a sea of official statements, self-congratulatory proclamations, calls to militancy, and claims of victimization by outside villains. As a result, many Arab liberals show a profound frustration about their inability to convince others of what to them seems so obvious.

One of the most compelling such analyses is that by the Paris-based al-Afif al-Akhdar, a Tunisian leftist intellectual. It is no accident that this essay appeared only on a liberal website where few Arabs ever saw it. Akhdar, formerly a columnist for *al-Hayat*, had been fired by its owner, Saudi Prince Khaled bin Sultan, after an October 2002 television interview in which he called the

Saudi regime barbaric for amputating criminals' limbs--a punishment sanctioned by Islamic law --and for its treatment of women.¹

Everyone in the world, Akhdar complained in his analysis, seemed to be advancing toward modernity, knowledge, and globalization while the Arabs were racing in the opposite direction. Whereas Eastern Europe rejected Communist dictatorship in exchange for peaceful, rapid progress toward democracy and economic development, in the Arab world one bloodthirsty dictatorship succeeds another. While other peoples progress, the Arab regime moves from "backwardness into sub-backwardness and from poverty into sub-poverty" in a sort of anti-progress.²

The causes of this sad fate are multiple to say the least. "Why is it," he asked, that the Arab world is so wealthy in natural resources and poor in human resources? Why does human knowledge elsewhere steadily grow

while in the Arab world what expands instead:

...is illiteracy, ideological fear, and mental paralysis? Why do expressions of tolerance, moderation, rationalism, compromise, and negotiation horrify us, but [when we hear] fervent cries for vengeance, we all dance the war dance? Why have the people of the world managed to mourn their pasts and move on, while we have...our gloomy bereavement over a past that does not pass? Why do other people love life, while we love death and violence, slaughter and suicide, and call it heroism and martyrdom...?³

His answer, in brief, is the contradiction so central to the Arab self-image and world-view. On one hand, Arabs suffer from an inferiority complex, a sense of failure, self-hatred, and "national humiliation whose shame can be purged only by blood, vengeance, and fire..." On the other hand, there is a sense of superiority at believing they are designated by God to lead humanity. Why would they want to borrow anything from the rest of the world which is both their oppressor and inferior?⁴

The *Koran* called Arabs the "best nation" among humanity. Yet life contradicted this self-image from Napoleon's easy conquest of Egypt in 1799 to the Arabs repeated defeats by Israel two centuries later. Wounds from these events joined with a "deep-rooted culture of tribal vengefulness" to create "a fixated, brooding, vengeful mentality" driving out "far-sighed thought and self-

criticism." The Arabs have failed to understand, as Japan did after its disastrous defeat in World War Two, the "vital necessity to emulate the enemy...becoming like him in modern knowledge, thought and politics, so as to reshape the traditional personality and adapt it to the requirements of the time..."⁵

By rejecting the West in general, he continues, Arab politics lost the chance to adapt such positive Western innovations as pragmatism in setting goals, strategy and tactics; analyzing the balance of power in a detached manner; managing crises through negotiated compromises; and building a rational decision-making process. Instead, public discussion is dismissed and negotiation is rejected both in domestic and foreign issues.⁶

That dead-end approach feeds the Arab world's obsession with what Akhdar calls, "This insane obsession with vengeance" against the West and Israel which has made reasonable thought impossible. Rather than learning from experience people curled "up within themselves like frightened snails, to brood about their dark thoughts" of revenge. They tried to lash back at others by adopting suicidal policies that injured themselves, blundering "from one destructive war into the next, much fiercer war." The Arab world became virtually the sole place on the globe incapable of identifying its real problems and priorities. Akhdar warns, "This is your last chance, Oh masters of the missed opportunity."⁷

This self-imposed closing off from the world, rejecting ideas as threatening precisely because they came from elsewhere, was called self-imposed ghettoism by the

Lebanese professor Radwan al-Sayyid.⁸ Among its elements, writes an Arab diplomat writing under a pseudonym, is a mentality that "concentrates on the past, lives in it, and longs to return to it...." Justifying positions on public issues by claiming one has divine authority inevitably brings intolerance and violent struggle. In contrast, the Western approach on religious matters is flexible, focusing on spirit rather than narrow adherence to texts. There, religion is a personal matter and no one is supposed to harass others in its name.⁹

"A society that lives in a state of internal fear," he concludes, "avoids investigating its causes" or learning from different cultures. A society that blames all its problems on others "cannot escape from being encased in its shell." Successful societies are neither ashamed nor harmed by exposing their problems and making changes. On the contrary, such behavior helps them improve themselves.¹⁰

But who is going to lead in creating a new society? Elsewhere in the world, such groups as students, intellectuals, businesspeople, professionals, and the working class had been the motive power of democratic change. In the Arab world, though, the proletariat remained tiny. Businesspeople are largely dependent on the government for patronage and are often partners in the regimes' corrupt practices. Intellectuals are champions for the rulers, wedded to ideologies that justify their deeds. Professionals--like lawyers, engineers, and doctors--fit all these categories and are frequently strongholds for the Islamists as well. Moreover, much of the intelligentsia is public employees, part of the dictatorial regimes rather than independent thinkers or a true opposition.

Democracy is the key missing idea whose absence has brought this tragic outcome, explains Shafeeq Ghabra. It is not the people who block progress but the rulers who depend on power rather than logic, on slogans rather than action, on tribal solidarity instead of law, and on the enforcement of conformity rather than diversity.¹¹

The Egyptian Usama al-Ghazali Harb, a professor and editor of *al-Siyassa al-Dawliya*, agrees. Ordinary people, who speak in "timid whispers," know the status quo is very wrong. The intellectuals have become the enemy of freedom, ordering everyone else to believe in the official line. Internal decay, not foreign threats, is the Arab world's fundamental problem. The best way for Arabs to defend themselves is to have democratic societies and legitimate systems of government. Despotism weakens the nation's ability to resist outside challenges rather than the other way around. But no one ever shouted out these truths until the West "came to knock on our doors and break into our homes demanding that we institute democracy."¹²

Up to that point, with few or no alternatives available for more liberty, most Arab intellectuals hoped instead that a more militant regime or ideology would solve all their problems. In fact, though, these rulers and ideas made things even worse. Hardly anyone considered going in the opposite direction, completely rejecting the premises they had accepted, and in turn, taught others.

How could people know better since there was nowhere in the Arab world to serve as a model for improvement? Amal Dunqal, an Egyptian poet, was sitting in Cairo's Café Rish one day in the 1970s talking to a young journalist leaving to work in Baghdad. The journalist explained that he was leaving because there was no freedom in Cairo. Suddenly Amal shouted at him: "My brother, you sit here and curse Sadat and you think

that in Baghdad you will be permitted to curse even the deputy manager of a post office...?"¹³

But why did Arab regimes and their vocal supporters succeed in staying in power and dominating the debate with so much success and so little dissent, at least of the democratic variety, for so many decades? The key point is their ability to deflect blame outward, to use the claim of victimization by the West and Israel as a way to mobilize everyone behind the dictator to battle these dreadful foes. Any other issue or concern becomes secondary, even harmful, as a distraction from that life-and-death battle. At any rate, no one need examine Arab shortcomings regarding religion, society, economy or governance because the real problem is imperialism.

This formula was well summarized by Abdel-Moneim Said, director of the al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, "Building is a long and arduous process; blaming others has always been easy and costs nothing. Denial is easy, whereas assuming responsibility is extremely difficult. After all, who wants to look at themselves in the mirror and see the truth?"¹⁴

In a remarkable column published in a UAE newspaper, sarcastically entitled "Long Live Dictatorship," the journalist Abdallah Rashid fearlessly looked into the mirror and pointed out the considerable mass support for the existing system. The world simply cannot understand the Arabs, he explains, who act as if they come from another planet. Do the Arabs really want freedom, he asks, or do they prefer to live in "the dungeon of repression, pleased and satisfied with

handcuffs on their wrists, bonds of steel on their ankles, and prisoner's collars about their necks?"¹⁵

It appears, he continues, as if the Arabs have become addicted to living under dictatorships. Their intellectuals curse the United States continuously for trying to establish democracy in Iraq but don't care that the Iraqi people want that system. Democracy is portrayed as a greater horror than dictatorship. In conclusion, he asks, "Has the worship of a dictator and of oppression become the foundation of Arab thought and culture?"¹⁶ The reader is left in little doubt that his answer is "yes."

Still the question remains: Why have the Arabs been so unable to achieve democracy? For example, a weak educational system is one factor Arab liberals often identify as a cause of this situation. Instead of schooling that encourages creativity and tolerance, Arab education is seen as merely indoctrination for supporting the existing system and extremist ideologies; failing to prepare young people with skills needed for progress. As Anton al-Maqdasi, a Syrian political philosopher complained the apparent goal is to make citizens as identical as possible in their ideas and views, "as if they were cast in the same mold."¹⁷

Yet, liberals warn, instead of ensuring that everyone loves the dictator, radical ideas purveyed in the schools—anti-American, anti-Western, anti-Zionist, rejecting compromise, glorifying violence, extremist interpretations of Islam—turn students toward revolutionary activity. Ironically, the system intended to control young people's minds turns them against the very regime that educates them.

Thus, liberals argue, rulers should support reform as a way of ensuring young people do not rebel but instead become more productive in economic and scientific terms.

But while some governments have made limited changes in the way Islam is taught in order to reduce the likelihood that students follow bin Ladin, they reject any thoroughgoing reform toward modernization and away from indoctrination.¹⁸ Kuwaiti journalist Hamid al-Hmoud complained that rather than see the September 11 attacks as a wake-up call for reexamining education, Arab leaders have gone into defensive mode. They reject the idea that the way students were taught pushed them toward "fanaticism and hatred" rather than acceptance of democracy, moderate Islam, or "modern human culture."¹⁹

The underlying problem is that the rulers know that, despite the liberals' honeyed words, any change undermines them. The regimes are eager to stop their subjects from criticizing, much less attacking, themselves, but hope to deflect their anger onto foreigners and even against domestic liberals. A free press means criticism of a system quite vulnerable to complaint; an anti-corruption campaign undermines the elite's income and attacks its mechanism for bribing key social groups to ensure their support. As a Syrian dissident asked, how can one monitor corruption without seeing that it involves the entire regime and all its officials no matter what their rank?²⁰

For example, in June 2002, Syria's Zeyzoun Dam collapsed just five years after being built. Five villages were destroyed; dozens of people were killed. For forty years, wrote a dissident on an opposition website, the government has abrogated freedoms,

imposed emergency laws, and killed tens of thousands of its own citizens on the pretext of leading a battle against foreign enemies. Yet it cannot solve the simplest domestic problems. Even the armed forces, on which so much money is spent, is only effective in killing its own citizens. The real dam that must fall down is the regime itself, because as long as it stands the Syrian people will never obtain either liberty or honor.²¹

As the Syrian writer notes, the struggle against imperialism and Zionism is the great excuse used to justify the status quo's survival and reject change. Yet it is in the waging of these largely imaginative struggles that the conflict is both maintained and lost. Xenophobic demagoguery has been very effective for Arab rulers and the intellectuals who do their ideological work. They merely have to say "Palestine," "Iraq," "Israel," "the United States," or slogans along these lines to abruptly end discussion of any other subject.

For shock value, a very few bold liberals are ready to challenge this world-view directly, even citing Israel as a better model for the Arab world than what presently exists. The Egyptian playwright Ali Salem, in a book on his visit to Israel that became a big seller in his own country, describes seeing an Israeli boy handing out bumper stickers calling for Israel to stay in the Golan Heights. For Salem, the fascinating detail was that he didn't scream at drivers who disagreed with him that they must be enemy agents.²²

Arabs should teach their own children, Salem observes, that people have the right to hold differing views as long as they don't act violently, "Let ideas do combat with each other, theory against theory, for the benefit of the nation." In the current Arab reality, though, only a single party and ideology is

permitted which excuses its monopoly by claiming to be so noble and pure. As a result, people die and kill each other for no reason except the stupid ideas inculcated by the system. He writes, tongue in check, that the regimes got rid of human rights but brought the benefit of making several hundred thousand people dead, wounded, or refugees. They enriched the Arab world by creating widows, bereaved parents, and orphans, as well as "relieving the Arab nation of the burden of governing a great deal of real estate."²³

How can this dreadful situation be changed? Akhdar says the Arabs need a pragmatic, rather than nationalist or Islamist, world-view. Otherwise they will continue to make fatal miscalculations which include:

The inability to read rationally the balance of powers before entering any given struggle... the deluded belief that divine intervention in history will produce results contrary to the laws of the balance of powers. Finally [there is] the suicidal madness of the Jihad and of sacrifice on the altar of faith as a magical religious solution to the deficiency in the balance of power.²⁴

One could imagine having a rational, efficient dictatorship, but even this modest goal eludes Arab regimes whose decisions remain so arbitrary and unrealistic. Such leaders as Arafat or Saddam Hussein merely act out of whim or wishful thinking instead of consulting institutions and advisors in a serious decision-making process. Instead,

their lieutenants "quake in their boots," afraid to tell the leader any unpleasant truths.²⁵

As examples, Akhdar cites stories about Arab leaders making monumental decisions on the basis of mystical thinking. He recalls how Iraqi dictator Abd al-Salam Aref awoke from a Ramadan nap in the 1960s in which he dreamed of having broken his fast. The presidential dream interpreter told him this meant he would receive good news. Aref claimed that a few hours later he received word of a ceasefire in his civil conflict with the Kurds. Akhdar adds similar stories about Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, who said he learned in a dream that an Islamist revolution would take place in Iraq--so why should he end his war with Baghdad?--and Saddam who told his staff that God had told him in a dream to invade Kuwait, justifying starting a war with that neighbor.²⁶ Hamas spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmad Yassin in 1999 said that he read between the lines in the Qur'an that Israel would collapse in 2027 and Palestinians would take over the whole country. This claim inspired the organization's members to fight on indefinitely.²⁷

A state or movement governed by such witchcraft-type methods, Akhdar remarks, will surely fail. When divine intervention or magic is the main source for decision-making, it is not surprising that people expect jihad and martyrdom to conquer all. While the Japanese responded to the challenge of a powerful West by learning its ways in order to surpass it, Arabs closed themselves off and rejected Western ideas or methods, thus ensuring defeat.²⁸

In critiquing their own society, Arab liberals raise arguments that would scare off a Western writer as not sufficiently politically correct. For example, Abdullah al-Jasmi, a Kuwait University philosophy professor, wrote that the Arab mentality mistakenly focuses on results rather than causes, emotions over rationality, and generalizations rather than learning from specific events. The cause of failure and backwardness was a whole way of thinking in which the main missing feature "is the brain."²⁹

How can this brain be exercised rather than exorcised? Radwan al-Sayyed, a professor of Islamic philosophy in Lebanon, said that the thing most needed in the Arab world "is self-criticism and self-evaluation."³⁰ In offering such answers, liberals had logic on their side but not the power of passion, simplistic rhetoric, and backing from a powerful political system or religious conviction. To narrow this gap, they often tried to operate within the consensus notion that the Arab world was indeed a victim of foreign aggression while insisting that this made reform all the more a necessity. If it was true that the Arabs were facing a successful assault from the West, Sayyed asserted, it was their own weakness that made them so vulnerable. Only liberal reform could save them.³¹

Another approach to this problem came from Urfan Nizamuddin, a veteran journalist and former editor of *al-Sharq al-Awsat*. Iraq and Palestine might be the most important issues facing the Arab world but that didn't mean other things, like education, should be neglected. Given the struggle of nations for power, an Arab failure on this front would ensure they would be the losers in every respect.³²

The Bahraini intellectual Muhammad al-Ansari also tried to use the idea of a foreign threat as a spur toward liberal reform. The Arabs could only win by creating the equivalent of a liberation front to free themselves from backwardness. It was impossible to wage wars against their enemies with a 70 percent illiteracy rate, high unemployment, or lack of human and women's rights. How can this war be won when ruling elites and their people are so divided and everyone is so desperate that they are driven to embrace fantasies as their only hope?³³

But the problem is that those forces of fantasy are quite powerful and continue to hold the loyalty of many—perhaps most—Arabs. On an al-Jazira television debate, Ghabra made the obvious point that bin Ladin was not offering some great project for progress—like achieving democracy, improving women's condition, or fixing the educational system—but merely proposing to turn the whole Arab world into one big Taliban-style regime. The program's host, Montaha al-Ramhi, then sprang into action, angrily interrupting him by shouting that someone had to stop the United States from taking over the Arab world.³⁴

It was the standard exchange. To criticize extremists, explore a social or economic problem seriously, or call for real change sets off a patriotic-religious hysteria which begins by accusing the dissident of treason and soon results in death threats. The problem is not that so many people are ready to fight for bin Ladin's basic ideas but rather that this same basic world-view is accepted and reinforced by so many intellectuals, journalists, and clerics. By doing so, they vicariously share in his revolutionary cult of martyrdom while not

so courageously protecting their careers by thundering an officially approved defiance against the West. They pretend to be heroes while not daring to criticize their own rulers.

In frustration, many liberals complain that it is very difficult to conduct a rational discussion with people who act this way, especially since they incite the emotions of people who are already suffer from so much frustration about their lives and the impossibility of changing them.³⁵ How much harder it becomes since that stance coincides with the dominant political culture! In Ansari's words, the idea of a great hero who will rescue the Arabs is well-grounded in history, from Saladin through Nasser and down to Saddam or bin Ladin. He explains, "It doesn't matter whether the hero is a liar, adventurer, tyrant, or terrorist, because the Arab mentality will ascribe to him a sanctity that covers his sins"³⁶

Indeed, the intellectuals even rewrite the heroes' ideas and goals as required to fit their needs. Thus, despite the fact that bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida virtually never mentioned the Palestine issue in their voluminous literature before September 11, fighting that battle is now portrayed as the motive for his actions.³⁷ Arab nationalist intellectuals have no interest in highlighting bin Ladin's purely Islamist goals, while the existing regimes' supporters do not want to confess that he is a revolutionary whose main goal is to overthrow them. By portraying bin Ladin as someone wreaking vengeance on the West and the Jews, he is made to fit into their own ideology, which extols external struggle while ignoring the need for an internal one.

As Ansari notes, such is the long-established pattern. The regimes claim that the masses demand militancy, when in fact they use the state-controlled, regime-serving media "to mobilize and incite" them. The central idea purveyed in all Arab societies "propaganda apparatus...education, culture, intellectual life, politics, and religion rests on the theory that outsiders are conspiring to divide, subvert, and hold back the Arabs."³⁸ In this context, many or most Arabs conclude that whether or not bin Ladin's methods were right, his motive is anger at evil Western deeds and at least he is striking against a true enemy. In this context, the September 11, 2001, attacks were a completely or at least partly legitimate battle in a just war.

For liberals, in contrast, September 11 was supposed to have been a great political opportunity born in tragedy. It was the ultimate proof that their rivals had no constructive program but could only dishonor Arabs and Muslims in the face of the world, inspiring international intervention against them. If the main apparent Arab reaction to September 11 had been sincere--condemning the attacks, despite blaming them in part on U.S. policy--the liberal cause should have prospered. After all, Arab leaders would have wanted to crush extremist Islamists who not only committed an act they claimed to regard as a vile crime but also threatened their own lives. Might not this threat prompt rulers to ally with the liberals in order to save themselves?

But this is not what happened. By and large, the rulers saw the new Jihadist movement as a problem for the West and a chance to strengthen themselves. This was in

the tradition of deflecting blame outward. By abandoning the previous radical Islamist strategy of putting the priority of revolution at home, they relieved pressure on the Arab governments. These Jihadists focused the energies of violent Arabs and the anger of the far more numerous passive ones on the West, not the local rulers.

When Jihadists put the emphasis on blaming America and Israel for the Muslims' problems and urged Arabs to fight them, this was a propaganda theme that rulers--and the intellectuals, media, and clerics who backed them--could wholeheartedly endorse. Much of the Arab media even denied there was any Arab or Muslim involvement in the attack, attributing it to Zionists or America itself. Thus, they considered the Western reaction to September 11 was merely one more event in the long history of unprovoked aggression against the Arab world and Islam, and thus still another reason for the Arabs to unite around their leaders battling this threat.

There was even a hybrid new liberal-reactionary argument: Why wasn't reform possible? Because the United States demanded tougher laws to fight terrorism, it--not local regimes--was the cause of repression in the Arab world. But if America was responsible for the conflict between itself and the Arab world, terrorism, and September 11, why should anyone want or need to change anything in Arab society? The true solution was to unite more completely and fight with more determination against foreign interference.

These were some of the points critiqued by Abd al-Moneim Said in one of the most comprehensive looks at this issue by any Arab writer. The Arab knee-jerk response to September 11, he wrote, "was to deny that the

perpetrators were Arab and that the event had any connection with Arab society and culture." The media and Arab public opinion spread wild conspiracy theories claiming bin Ladin was innocent even after he claimed responsibility. The reason for this denial was clear: To confront the implications of September 11 honestly would require examining the real problems, especially Islamism, "which Arab societies have been so assiduously avoiding."³⁹

The more Middle Eastern terrorism spread globally, "the greater was the rush to look the other way." Bin Ladin was simultaneously treated as a hero and a U.S. creation (for use against the Soviets in Afghanistan), ignoring among other points the fact that Arab governments had supported him. While Arabs criticize Samuel Huntington's "conflict of civilizations" concept, they conveniently forget that this is precisely their own view of the world: that Arab-Muslim civilization faces an all-out attack from its Western counterpart.⁴⁰

A similar approach was taken by Muhammad Ahmad al-Hassani, a Saudi columnist, who asks from where did these terrorists get their ideas? They were neither poor nor uneducated. Indeed, the problem was the way they were educated--by mainstream religious teachers who convinced them they must fight a battle of "good versus evil, truth versus falsehood."⁴¹ But any discussion of Islam's role in society or as a doctrine promoting extremism is an especially big problem for liberals.

Aside from such questions as governance, psychology, culture, religion, and the role of women, the Arab world's economic problems are also tightly bound up with the dictatorial system's shortcomings. The Arab world is in

a terrible economic situation. Statistics are devastating. Per capita income grew at only an annual rate of 0.5 percent over 25 years, less than half the global average. Even with massive oil income, the average Arab living standard declined compared to the rest of the world. The combined Gross Domestic Product of all Arab countries was less than that of Spain alone.⁴²

To address these problems without making any real changes, many government officials and supporters advocate what they call a Chinese-type reform, modernizing the economy while leaving the political system untouched. Yet the economy's weakness is a product of the existing political system and lack of democracy. This shortcoming, plus the resulting violence and instability it provokes, discourages foreign investment, at least outside of the oil and gas sector. Corporate disinterest is increased by bureaucratic problems and such factors as low productivity, public sector monopolies, and problems in the state-controlled banking sector. As the economist Ziad Abdelnour put it, "The Arab world is not a great place to do business and it's not getting any better."⁴³

Take the banking system, for example. Financial capital represents power and the state was reluctant to let others have it. These semi-governmental banks--of which four in Egypt control half the market--lend mostly to the state and those with political connections. Private firms are kept from expanding to avoid competition with state monopolies or companies owned by the rulers and their allies.⁴⁴ In short, the economic system--like the ideological and religious ones--is one more factor blocking change.⁴⁵ Michel Kilo,

a Syrian liberal, warns that there can be no economic reform without political reform.⁴⁶

A case that illustrates this broader principle was the story of Sainsbury's involvement in Egypt. Sainsbury, Britain's second-largest supermarket chain, decided to go into business in Egypt starting in April 1999. Its 100 stores provided 2,500 jobs in a country with massive unemployment and it planned to create more, making Egypt its base for making goods to export throughout the region. But Egyptian customs blocked its import of goods, competing small retailers convinced Islamic clerics to put a religious ban on shopping in its stores, and militants spread false rumors that the company's owner was Jewish and had given huge donations to Israel's West Bank settlements.

This campaign resulted in organized shopping boycotts, mob attacks on stores, destruction of its signs, and beating up of employees. The company responded with ads saying it had nothing to do with Israel and decorated stores with Quranic verses. The government did nothing to help. And so after big financial losses, the company left Egypt only two years after arriving there with ambitious plans. The anti-Israel boycott groups rejoiced at still another victory over the alleged forces of Zionism, imperialism--and also defeating any chance of improving Egypt's economy, job supply, efficiency, and living standards.⁴⁷

What do the liberals themselves stand for? What system do they see as preferable for the Arab world? In general, they rarely discuss details. There is not a great deal of original or systematic thinking, much less

comprehensive programs or philosophical overviews.

On a more programmatic level, the reform plan has been presented in many meetings of liberal groups (mostly those dealing with human rights) beginning in 2004. The two most important statements were the March 2004 Alexandria Declaration and the September 2004 Beirut Statement.⁴⁸ In both cases, the meetings enjoyed official state sponsorship—itsself a sign of the regimes' power—but liberal then took the opportunity beyond what the rulers intended.

The meeting in Alexandria, Egypt, entitled, "Arab Reform Issues: Vision and Implementation" was organized as a government maneuver to quiet international pressure on democratization. The goal was to show that Arab societies were perfectly capable of reforming themselves. Mubarak himself addressed the gathering of two hundred Arab activists and intellectuals, with some of the most outspoken dissidents—including Said Eddin Ibrahim, Egypt's most energetic liberal reformer—not being invited. Yet afterward, Ibrahim was able to describe the resulting declaration as "a sort of Arab Magna Carta." Its tone is very much one of issuing a Bill of Rights for the Arab world.

A second, largely parallel, liberal statement was developed by a September 2004 conference in Beirut, and was held under the name "Partnership for Peace, Democracy and Development in the Broader Middle East and North Africa."⁴⁹ It was organized to present an Arab position to a Forum for the Future meeting in New York that would bring together Western and Arab states. The resulting resolution was far more welcoming of international involvement in

promoting Arab reform than was its Alexandrian counterpart.

Both statements suggested that resolving such regional conflicts as the Palestinian-Israeli one and others in Iraq, Kashmir, and Afghanistan would enhance reform efforts while weakening autocratic governments and radical movements. At the same time, though, they noted that governments, in the words used by the Beirut Statement, "Have often used these regional security issues to delay political, economic and social reform, as if solving these issues can only come at the cost of suppression and oppression."

According to the declaration issued at the end of the Alexandria conference, the goal of reform is "genuine democracy" which is defined as a system in which freedom is the highest value, the people have sovereignty, and political pluralism is enshrined. This also means a division of powers among an elected legislature, an independent judiciary, and an executive branch subject to both constitutional and political accountability. There must be respect for all the rights of all people, including freedom of thought and expression as well as the right to organize political parties and other groups.

These freedoms are to be safeguarded by an independent media, fair elections, and the transfer of power to those successful at the ballot box. The rule of law must prevail, meaning the abolition of special courts and emergency laws. On the economic front, the market must be freed to function with less governmental interference. Unlike the current situation, a proper economy must be open to foreign investment, capable of growth, providing jobs, and reducing poverty.

The reformers also understand that a successful change cannot be limited to

politics alone. Other elements needed for democratization include such things as the empowerment of women, a family structure able to create free individuals taking responsibility for their choices (in place of a current norm teaching what was called at Alexandria, "submissiveness and obedience"), the elimination of outdated social customs, and a media which teaches "equality, tolerance, accepting the other" as well as other positive values.

Liberals also discussed the necessity of putting a higher value on innovation, higher quality education, technology, and science. The Beirut Statement said that what is needed is, "A thorough revision of education generally, and of religious education where intolerance is actively advocated in its name, where basic and high quality skills are trained and critical inquisitive thinking is promoted."

But how was all this to be accomplished? The proposals were largely for more conferences; discussions with the Arab League, the establishment club of Arab states known for its ineffectiveness; and partnership with the Arab regimes. The Beirut Statement went a bit further, proposing a partnership between governments, the international community, and civil society groups.

While these and other such statements basically propose working through existing regimes there has also been, most notably in Egypt, the beginnings of a politically organized mass movement for reform. However, even if such organizational efforts are limited, on the agenda-setting front, reformers have clearly identified the steps needed to advance the Arab world into the Twenty-First Century, build democracy,

ensure social peace, and raise living standards. But what a monumental task this is! Even the optimistic Ghabra warns that Arab nationalist statism and Islamism are mutually reinforcing roadblocks. Only reformists backed by the "moderate silent majority" can bring progress. But that group--if it indeed exists--is, he admits, largely paralyzed, weak, and unable to influence events.⁵⁰

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NOTES

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⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Radwan al-Sayyed, *al-Mustaqbal*, June 13, 2003.

⁹ Abu Ahmad Mustafa, "When Will the Arabs Learn the Lesson, Just Once," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*. October 27, 2002. Translation in MEMRI, No. 540, July 22, 2003.

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¹¹ Shafeeq Ghabra, *al-Rai al-Aam*, June 11, 2003.

¹² Osama El-Ghazali Harb, "The Moment of Truth," *al-Ahram Weekly*, April 24-30, 2003 and in *al-Siyassa Al-Dawliya*, January 2004. Translation in MEMRI, No. 663, February 16, 2004.

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¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Cited in Zvi Bar'el, "Syria: Where time stood still since 1963," *Ha'aretz*, September 25, 2003.

¹⁸ See, for example, Othman al-Rawath, a member of the Saudi Shura Council and professor of political science at King Saud University, in *al-Sharq al-Awsat* July 7, 2003.

¹⁹ *Al-Quds*, September 30, 2002.

²⁰ Abd Al-Raouf Haddad, *Akhbar al-Sharq*, June 20, 2002.

²¹ Mahmoud Al-Mahamid, *Akhbar al-Sharq*, June 20, 2002.

²² Ali Salem, "My Drive to Israel," *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2002, Vol. IX, No. 1.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Arab Statesmanship's Fatal Flaw: Backward Political Decision-Making," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, May 18, 2003. Translated in MEMRI, No. 518, June 5, 2003. See

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<http://www.elaph.com.:9090/elaph/arabic/fro ntendProcess.jsp> on May 17, 2003.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., on the Saddam story he cites Sa'ad al-Bazaz, *The Generals Are the Last to Learn*, p. 101.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Abdallah al-Jasmi, *al-Rai al-Aam*, June 8, 2003.

³⁰ Radwan al-Sayyed, professor of Islamic Philosophy at Lebanon University, *al-Mustakbal*, June 13, 2003.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Urfan Nizamuddin, *al-Hayat*, June 16, 2003.

³³ Mohammad al-Ansari, *al-Hayat*, June 16, 2003.

³⁴ Fouad Ajami, "What the Muslim World is Watching," *New York Times Magazine*, November 18, 2001.

³⁵ Abu Ahmad Mustafa (pseudonym), "When Will the Arabs Learn the Lesson, Just Once," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 27, 2002. Translation in MEMRI, No. 540, July 22, 2003.

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³⁶ Interview with Abd al-Hamid al-Ansari, *al-Raya*, January 6, 2002. Translation in MEMRI, No. 337, January 29, 2002.

<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP33702>.

³⁷ Ibid. For a non-Arab Muslim example of the same phenomenon see the interview with Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf, *Washington Post*, September 26, 2004. When asked if he thought al-Qa'ida wanted to overthrow the Egyptian and Saudi governments and install radical Islamist regimes, he responded only--and falsely--that the origin of bin Ladin's organization and the cause of the September 11 attack was the Palestinian struggle.

³⁸ *Al-Rayah*, April 20, 2003.

³⁹ *Al-Ahram Weekly*, October 6, 2002.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Muhammad Ahmad Al-Hassani, *Okaz*, May 14, 2003. Translated by MEMRI, No. 505, May 15, 2003.

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⁴³ Ziad K. Abdelnour, "Democratization of Capital in the Arab World," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 5, May 2003.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Cited in Zvi Bar'el, "Syria: Where time stood still since 1963," *Ha'aretz*, September 25, 2003.

⁴⁷ See *al-Ahram Weekly*, April 26-May 2, 2001; Menas Associates, "Sainsbury's scales back local presence," December 2000, Volume 10, Number 11, <<http://www.menas.co.uk/Egfa0004.html>>.

⁴⁸ The text of the Alexandria statement can be found in *Democracy Digest*, May 6, 2004, Volume 1, Number 1 and at <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/reform/alex2004.htm>; arabreformforum.com; and MEMRI, No. 179, June 11, 2004 at <http://memri.org/bin/latestnews.cgi?ID=IA17904>.

⁴⁹ For the text, see *Democracy Digest*, Vol. 1, No. 18 (October 19, 2004).

⁵⁰ *Daily Star*, January 8, 2004.