

The Islamic resurgence in the Arab world and the need for a Dialogue *within* Civilisation  
By Ghoncheh Tazmini, research fellow at SOAS, London, United Kingdom

### *Introduction*

The upheavals spanning much of the Arab world over the last two years have introduced dramatic change in the region, overthrowing leaders in some countries and seriously destabilising regimes in others. Some have suggested that Iran would be the main beneficiary of regional instability, owing to the ‘the downfall of pro-US Arab regimes in the region, an emboldened Arab public angry at Israel and hostile to US foreign policy, and growing assertiveness of Shi’ites. The rise of political Islam in the Arab world, they argue, has shifted the balance of power in Tehran’s favour. Various analyses of the post-revolutionary Arab world are replete with talk of ‘Islamic crescents’ with the Islamic Republic of Iran haphazardly blazing the trail. There is also much hype and speculation that Iran is using all of its resources to manipulate and hamper democratic transitions in the Arab world.

In this analysis, I go beyond assessing Iran’s role in the Arab spring as strictly a strategic rival or a regional power. There are lessons to be drawn from Iran – and not necessarily the 1979 Iranian-Islamic revolution or the so-called Green Movement in 2009. I will draw on Mohammad Khatami’s presidency (1997-2005) during which the reformer-president had to respond to calls for progressive social and political reforms within a theocratic-Islamic template. I will advance the idea of a broad-based ‘dialogue *within* civilisation’ as a framework in which all segments of post-authoritarian Arab society – Islamist, conservative, liberal, secular, the youth and minority groups – discuss how to integrate both indigenous and ‘nativistic’ practices and traditions with more ‘modern’, ‘democratic’ institutions. Moreover, I will argue that the international community can act as a consensus-builder by encouraging post-authoritarian Arab societies to pave their own path to modernity by pursuing a strategy of ‘autonomous adaptation’ to new political and social realities.

### *Islamic resurgence*

The interpretation of the Arab spring as an ‘Islamic awakening’ provides more substance than many analysts would like to admit. The instinctive rejection of the events being called an ‘Islamic awakening’, merely because it was an Iranian Ayatollah who chose this expression, is not helpful for a proper understanding of the Arab world. While the idea that the Arab revolts are modelled after the Islamic revolution of 1979 is far-fetched, the claim that the current Arab revolutions owe a great part of their success to the Iranian revolution should be critically scrutinized instead of condescendingly dismissed. Political Islam, an undeniable phenomenon today, was initially made presentable by the 1979 revolution, which took place amid an Arab world that was at that time saturated by Arabism and nationalistic and socialistic ideals.

In effect, the Arab awakening has become a launching pad for Islamist political ascendance. Looking across the region, from country to country, Islam has proved influential. How can we explain the fact that Islamists performed so strongly in the elections? Ascher Susser makes an interesting observation: ‘Virtual reality and influence in cyber-space have been confused with real political power, as the leaderless mass movements that have produced neither coherent political platforms nor well-articulated policies have encountered great difficulty in transforming virtual influence into tangible political strength’ (2011). Thus, the more traditional, better organized and more ideologically coherent forces in Middle Eastern politics, like the Islamists or the military were more successful in seizing the reins of power.

### *Moving from tradition to modernity*

While Islam remains important, the Arab revolts were not driven by religion but by political and socio-economic factors: dictatorship, oppression, nepotism, social inequality, structural poverty and demographic changes. The paradox of the Arab awakening is that there was little or no reference to

religion, and without any reference to pan-Islamism, pan-Arabism or the Palestinian cause. This is interesting to note, given that, empirically speaking, the Arab revolts took place after three decades of what has been called the re-Islamicization of Arab societies, that is, the revival of religious attitudes, practices and symbols (Chatham House 2013). Even more ironic is the fact that the Islamist parties came to power through the democratic process of free and fair elections. This demonstrates the complex and paradoxical nature of the Arab revolts.

The case I am making here is that there is a broad range of political and economic demands, intertwined with disparate ideological orientations and sociological trends. Considering Islam's political ascendance, Arab society will have to reconcile tradition and dogma with the reality of the emancipatory movements. The challenge ahead is to adapt indigenous and 'nativistic' practices with more 'liberal', 'democratic' or 'modern' norms and institutions.

This brings us to the role of Islam in politics alongside specific aspects of the democratic process and of institution-building (the multiparty system, participation of women in the political process, coalition-building, equality of minorities and freedom of religion). Will Islamists let other elements compete freely and fairly in elections once they have consolidated power? How will Islamists cater for the wider society that includes secularists, liberals, religious minorities, and women? Will *shari'a* (Islamic law) form a basis for new constitutions and will it accept secondary status to the legislation of a democratically-elected legislature? Does civil society mean the thing it does in secular, liberal societies or will it take a different expression in Arab societies? What institutional form will pluralism take with Islamists at the helm?

### *Islamic renewal*

There are no easy answers to these questions, and much debate and deliberation will have to take place between *all* segments of society in the form of a dialogue *within* civilisation. Seeing as many of these questions involve Islam and its democracy, a rigorous hermeneutic project needs to be undertaken as part of this dialogue. There are many Islams, as there are many forms of Christianity – Opus Dei, Liberation Theology, the Papacy and Protestantism and its offshoots. So the crux of the issue is which Islam are we talking about? As such, interpretation lies at the centre of this proposed dialogue. For this reason I propose an extensive hermeneutic reckoning of inherited structures of understanding. This brings to mind the prominent Algerian thinker Mohammad Arkoun who sought to expand the very definition and conception of Islam, and to extend those aspects of tradition that lend themselves to the liberal-democratic project. Arkoun vehemently denied the validity of any single conception of a 'true Islam'. He also denied any essential difference between western and Islamic cultural values, thereby presenting Islam as a many-sided and dynamic cultural force in full evolution and without fixed possibilities.

Another contemporary theorist is Islamic intellectual Fatima Mernissi who argues that Islam presents both democratic and undemocratic models, which may either be *nurtured* or *curtailed* depending on the needs of modern society. Discourses of this nature are extremely useful for Muslim-majority societies undergoing transition. An important component of the proposed 'dialogue within civilisation' is a comprehensive hermeneutic approach in order to locate solutions to the challenge of modernity in Islamic texts and structures by virtue of the *democratic* and *undemocratic* elements of Islam that can either be nurtured or curtailed, according to the needs of the day (Mirsepassi 2010, p. 22).

In this Arab 'spring' there is an opportunity for Islam to undergo a seasonal change and to renew itself in light of new political realities. Islamic groups have found themselves in a unique historical 'moment' where they are forced to test their commitment to democracy. What is happening in the Arab world is a truly historical evolution that finally links Islam to universal principles of freedom, democracy and social equality.

The indicators have been positive so far. Moderate Islamist parties have participated in parliamentary elections in Morocco (the Party for Justice and Development), Jordan (the Islamic Action Front) in Yemen (al-Islah), Kuwait (Islamic Constitution Movement) or as independents in Egypt.

Ennahda in Tunisia, whose leader Rachid Ghannouchi, has argued for years about the compatibility of Islam and democracy, stating that they do not want to impose *shari'a* law or the wearing for the hijab or an alcohol ban. (However, there have been mixed signals on these issues from certain Islamists who see these as necessary for an alternative long term agenda). The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its Freedom and Justice Party, has embraced pluralism and non-extremism and they have had to engage openly with other political forces and work within state institution and with greater transparency.

Then there are the Salafis in Egypt who participated in mainstream politics, in other words, they embraced the electoral process after decades of having denounced democracy as un-Islamic or *kufri*. They ultimately adopted the approach of the Muslim Brotherhood, which they had hitherto rejected. Whether this transformation was more a rushed affair stemming from expediency rather than a natural ideological evolution is open to debate. The fact is that there was an overwhelming need to adapt to, and accommodate, a new reality. Many Salafis, especially the political parties are willing to work with the Muslim Brotherhood toward the common goals of furthering the democratic transition and containing radical and militant tendencies. Such adaptation lies at the heart of an enduring and sustainable transformation in post-authoritarian Arab societies.

Post-authoritarian Arab states are in the throes of an historical 'moment' where they are being pushed them to explore a more *integrative and adaptive* developmental strategy. Arshin Adib Moghaddam contends that Islam is realising its latent social and cultural force, transforming itself into a 'postmodern Islam', that is, a radical departure from the deterministic, totalitarian 'Islamism' of previous generations. He makes the compelling case that we are at a historical juncture that promises to sweep away the gross misconception that there is an inert Arab or Muslim personality prone to authoritarianism. Indeed until Tunisia erupted, the dominant narrative was that Muslim societies are beset by radicalism and that al-Qaida is a viable political force. Over the past decade, the fight against 'Muslim radicalism' has seen huge resources allocated to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; to the regime-change strategy in Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Gaza; and to huge military budgets and many national-security papers.

Now, a deep transformation is exposing the shortcomings of this approach. Islam's own transformation is a key agent of this process of renewal.

### *Home-grown modernity*

All the same, what we have in the Arab world are fragile democracies. The international community needs to encourage post-revolutionary Arab societies to engage in an intra-civilisational dialogue, or a 'dialogue *within* civilisation'. Furthermore, the international community should recognize that it will take time and resources for Arab societies to address these questions and to accommodate demands for 'modern', 'liberal' or 'western-inspired' norms and institutions within a traditional template. It should come as no surprise that these states will be perpetually evolving and adapting according to political demands, economic challenges, demographic changes, as well as the need to function and to integrate on a global level. In other words, the Arab world is re-writing its own history – a task that needs to be carried out organically, and locally, and without western interference.

The 'Arab revolts' may in fact turn out to be a 'spring' but the nature of that spring needs to be determined by Arab societies and on their *own* watch. As Simon Murden explains, the development of a political model is an incremental process and cannot be achieved overnight. He makes this argument with reference to the evolution of liberalism in the West:

Liberalism was never applied in an ideal form. Liberal ideas established influential tendencies in the politics and economic systems of Europe and North America, but they always ran alongside other forms of belief and practice. Liberalism was varyingly meshed with Christianity, kingship, class, status, nation, and the state ... People could aspire to liberal ideals while retaining elements of their pre-existing beliefs. Meshing liberalism with ideologies sometimes caused tensions within and between societies, but

westerners lived with those contradictions over long periods (Murden 2002, p. 1-2).

Fred Halliday advances a similar argument:

Fukuyama, like many in the West, overestimated how many states had attained democracy ... First, the economic history of few, if any societies in the world had even approximated to the free market model of liberal theory – the development of Japan, Singapore, Korea, and before that of Germany and Britain relied centrally on state intervention ... Secondly, democracy was not a sudden, all or nothing event ... but a gradual process, over decades and centuries: it took Britain and the USA three hundred years and three internal wars between them to move from tyranny to the kind of qualified democracy they have now. Thirdly, liberal politics is not a single act, bestowing finality on a political system. No one can be certain that a democracy is even reasonably stable unless it has been installed for at least a generation – many have appeared only to disappear (Halliday 2005, p. 159)

Institution-building is a long-term process, thus we must not judge the Arab ‘spring’ on a seasonal base. Adib-Moghaddam reinforces this assertion by explaining that the Middle East, subjugated and colonized for years, is witnessing independence and transformation into a non-colonial order. The Middle East, he maintains, is a ‘Euro-Americo-centric designation’, defined and imagined from the perspective of Europe and the US. Furthermore, it is region that buttresses the West’s claim to hegemony, ‘re-inscribing dependency into the very consciousness of the peoples and governments acting in that area’. The Arab ‘intifada’, as he calls it, signals the end of the Middle East, ‘which translates into the end of dependency on the west’. ‘They don’t need us to dictate words to them and to pester them with our patronizing wisdom. This is what the Iraq war and the uprisings should have taught us’ (2011).

### *Moving away from ethnocentrism*

We have made the case that political transitions take years to evolve depending on each state’s peculiarities. Political theorist Charles Taylor notes that these days we speak of ‘multiple modernities’, the plural reflecting the fact that other non-western cultures have modernized in their own way, and cannot properly be understood if we try to grasp them in a general theory which was originally designed with the western case in mind (2012). The fact is that the predominant narratives of modernity are grounded in European historical experience. Modernity is situated in a western frame of reference, with a western governing centre. Thus much of the western world sees the ‘rest’ or the ‘others’ through a Eurocentric lens. This lends itself to an overwhelming tendency to homogenize the world, which some argue is a smokescreen for subtle neo-colonial forms of domination (Dallmayr 1996).

At the onset of the Arab spring, analysts were quick to refer to the revolts as a ‘democratic wave’. This ‘democratic wave’ allegedly came in four phases: it caused the fall of the dictatorships in Europe in Portugal, Greece and Spain in the 1970s, then in Latin America and Asia in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by Eastern Europe and other countries in the 1990s; and finally it swept through the Mediterranean and Arab world (Vasconcelos 2011). *What has become clear is that democratic revolutions do not automatically beget democratic institutions.* There is no global uniformity when it comes to the task of modernising political structures. History has taught us that modernity cannot be borrowed, imposed or ‘copied and pasted’. As Ali Mirsepassi reminds us, ‘Modernity is not an object or blueprint which is already completed and needs merely to be purchased or sold. It is an end that one

moves toward only on the basis of dialogue and collective agreement ...' (2010, p.189). What we need on a global level is to foster universal recognition of the heterogeneity of modernisation experiences.<sup>1</sup>

Conservative British commentator David-Pryce Jones contends that the idea that Arabs want freedom and democracy, à la the storming of the Berlin Wall is a 'Eurocentric fantasy resting on the inability to grasp how other societies actually operate' (Pryce-Jones 2012). Although this is a rather strong statement, the fact is that post-revolutionary Arab societies need to craft their own developmental path based on their own historical, revolutionary, cultural-religious experience (free from outside interference or pressure or sabotage).

The problem is that modernity has been depicted as an exclusionary ideology grounded in European cultural experience. The fact is that the non-western world did not experience the Renaissance, the Reformation or the Enlightenment (and its democratic offshoots), thus development and modernity cannot possibly mean the same thing in non-western societies and cultures. Until the dominant north Atlantic and western European states accept the fact that modernity has multiple trajectories, development in the Arab world will remain polarized.

The West needs to move away from a unilateral logic toward a genuine cross-cultural encounter that takes a much broader view of 'democratic transition', by placing the process in the long-term context of cultural adaptation of civilisational complexes to the challenge of democratisation and modernisation. For example, talk about 'aid conditionality' as a way to increase leverage on donor countries, has particularly domineering and punitive connotations. Shadi Hamid from the Brookings Doha Centre advances the following proposition: '... if the goal is to pressure recalcitrant governments and encourage real, sustained democratisation ... any future economic assistance should depend on demonstrating progress on key political indicators, including transfer of power to civilian rule and respect for civil society' (2012). Such an approach will only generate resentment – far more creative strategies of confidence-building are required and that begins with acknowledgement of the fact that democratisation cannot be controlled or speeded up through negative measures.

### *Lessons from Iran*

We often hear about Iran and Turkey representing models of emulation for post-revolutionary Arab states. In fact, both countries and their political models are sources of emulation. This may be a controversial statement but the argument here is that each state needs to craft its own indigenous, home-grown modernity. This is what Iran and Turkey have done. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a *sui generis*, a political system that is the product of its own, particularistic, historical, cultural, revolutionary civilisational experience. From state-sponsored westernisation in imperial Iran, followed by the creation of a non-western modernity in the form of an Islamic theocracy in post-revolutionary Iran, Iran's experiments with socio-political transformation reveal a perplexing and often contradictory encounter with modernity and development. What we have seen in post-revolutionary Iran is the attempt to move away from the failed trajectories of the past, towards a homespun variety of modernity.

In 1997, Khatami secured over 70 percent of the popular mandate based on themes including democratic reform, civil society, pluralism and the rule of law. Khatami's challenge was to reconcile characteristically 'modern' or western-orientated reforms with the traditional establishment's deep-seated anxiety over the possibility of 'West-toxication'.<sup>2</sup> Khatami realized that his reforms would have to be introduced cautiously and at a measured pace. Furthermore, he understood the importance of pushing forwards with progressive reforms within the existing Islamic political and cultural template. Khatami's developmental strategy was based on adaptation of the western form of modernity to local and traditional elements. While the politics spawned under Khatami's watch lacked a consistent cumulative pattern, they

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<sup>1</sup> The issue is that the west operates under the assumption that there is some sort of historical inevitability to liberal society.

<sup>2</sup> 'West-toxication' is a term coined by Jalal Al-e Ahmad to describe the cultural disease that had plagued Iran in the 1960s. The conservatives continue to subscribe to this view.

were stamped by a profound commitment to democratic goals and method. Khatami's politics demonstrably repudiated influential, mythical, anthropological theories that stress the passivity and innate authoritarianism of Islamic cultures and societies.

Khatami's small yet significant successes were largely overshadowed by an institutional gridlock that impeded many of his efforts to implement change. Between 1997 and 2005, reform efforts were stifled amidst intra-elite wrangling between conservative hardliners, who dominated the traditional economic and cultural sources of power, and the reform-orientated elements of society. Khatami was unable to manoeuvre around the political structure or to reconcile the political rifts that impeded his programme for change (Tazmini 2009, p. 2).

Had Khatami fostered a more extensive, critical and interactive intra-societal dialogue *before* initiating his reform project, it is likely that conservative resistance would have been much less severe. The reformer-president overlooked the importance of defining and describing precisely what a modernized Islamic Republic would look like. How would an Islamic democracy differ from a secular western democracy? Did Iranian civil society mean the same thing it did in the West? What precisely was being reformed, and to what extent would the status quo change if the reform project fully materialized? Inattention to these salient questions fuelled the conservative resistance, which, in the end, stifled the movement. Khatami and his supporters needed to explain how their slogans and theories would translate in practical terms. This is not to detract from the fact that the fragility of the reform movement was largely attributed to the constitutional-institutional limitations of the president, his popular mandate and his allies, vis-à-vis the conservative religious establishment (Tazmini 2009, p. 142).

The important lesson for post-revolutionary Arab societies is that it is essential to achieve broad-based political consensus on a wide spectrum of issues, ideologies and orientations. I argue that Khatami could have done much more to allay the fears of the traditional or conservative segments of society who feared the possibility of 'West-toxication' and the infiltration of western influences. Khatami called for a dialogue among civilisations but that dialogue had to begin inside Iran. The same recommendation can be made to post-revolutionary Arab societies that will undoubtedly have to reckon with more traditional and conservative elements not to mention more radical groups like the Salafis.

### *Conclusion*

Now we can try to pull together the various strands of this analysis in order to reach a substantive conclusion that will inform the debate on democratic transitions in the Arab world. We have attempted to illustrate that in light of the Islamic resurgence in post-revolutionary Arab societies, there is an urgent need for an intra-societal debate. We have made this point by drawing on Khatami's reform-orientated presidency, an era when Iran had to respond to calls for political openness and social liberties. This was a time when Iran faced the challenge of weaving 'western-inspired' practices into Iran's national, religious and historical tapestry. However, while Khatami carried the banner of 'Dialogue of Civilisations' he overlooked the importance of a dialogue *within* civilisation. With the encouragement of the outside world, a broad-based domestic dialogue needs to take place in order to determine how political Islam will feature in societies that have clearly demonstrated an eagerness for democratic practices and institutions. The international community can help Arab transitions using a two-pronged approach: on a *local* and *societal* level, it can encourage an intra-civilisational, intra-societal dialogue concerning adaptation of Islam, modernity and democratic norms and institutions, coupled with a rigorous hermeneutic approach of reassessing and reinterpreting religious and classical texts more extensively and creatively. On a *global* level, we need to foster universal recognition of the heterogeneity of the experiences of modernity. This means the EU and the US need to overcome their ethnocentric tendencies and to subdue their impulse to control or dominate development by encouraging Arab states to pursue a strategy of 'autonomous adaptation' to the new political and social reality on their horizon.

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