

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

“DEMOCRACY DEFICIT” IN THE ARAB MIDDLE EAST

EASY MONEY AND AUTHORITARIANISM

By

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A Research Paper Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

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Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

April 2009

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE APR 2009		2. REPORT TYPE N/A		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Democracy Deficit In The Arab Middle East: Easy Money And Authoritarianism				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Air Command And Staff College Air University Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT It seems to be a commonly held belief by many that Islamic values are incompatible with the ideals of democracy, and that Islams tight grasp on the Arab Middle East is the underpinning of authoritarian rule in the region. However, this paper takes the view that the reasons for a lack of democracy in the region go much deeper and seeks to understand the root issue. Many scholars and experts construe Islam as not only compatible with democracy but also as demanding governance through many of the same ideals. Further, cultural and historical elements build a framework to better understand the context of modern day Arab Middle East, but do not fully explain the democracy deficit in the Arab Middle East. Post-World War II Italy evolved to embrace democracy yet presents very similar patterns to the Arab Middle East in terms of religion, culture, and society. A comparison of material cultural and socioeconomic patterns points towards the contrary economic conditions and policies as the major difference between the two regions, and these economic conditions in the Arab Middle East were premised on their rentier economies. These economic conditions are an integral theme in practically all of the cultural and historical elements defining the modern Arab Middle East as well as the bedrock for the authoritarian regimes power. Conditions created by these rentier economies enable the authoritarian regimes to maintain strict control over their social, economic, and political systems and thus delay the implementation of democratic ideals in the region.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT SAR	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 40	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

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Abstract

It seems to be a commonly held belief by many that Islamic values are incompatible with the ideals of democracy, and that Islam's tight grasp on the Arab Middle East is the underpinning of authoritarian rule in the region. However, this paper takes the view that the reasons for a lack of democracy in the region go much deeper and seeks to understand the root issue. Many scholars and experts construe Islam as not only compatible with democracy but also as demanding governance through many of the same ideals. Further, cultural and historical elements build a framework to better understand the context of modern day Arab Middle East, but do not fully explain the "democracy deficit" in the Arab Middle East.

Post-World War II Italy evolved to embrace democracy yet presents very similar patterns to the Arab Middle East in terms of religion, culture, and society. A comparison of material cultural and socioeconomic patterns points towards the contrary economic conditions and policies as the major difference between the two regions, and these economic conditions in the Arab Middle East were premised on their rentier economies. These economic conditions are an integral theme in practically all of the cultural and historical elements defining the modern Arab Middle East as well as the bedrock for the authoritarian regimes' power. Conditions created by these rentier economies enable the authoritarian regimes to maintain strict control over their social, economic, and political systems and thus delay the implementation of democratic ideals in the region.

Introduction

Islam is compatible with democracy, but the economic conditions created by the rentier economies of the Arab Middle East enable authoritarian regimes to maintain power and resist liberal democracy's march. Cultural and historical contextual factors contributed to liberal democracy's inability to take hold in the Arab Middle East, but the economic conditions specific to the Arab Middle East ultimately enable authoritarian regimes to maintain power. In turn, these authoritarian regimes, facilitated by rentier economies, fan religious and political Islamic fundamentalism throughout the Arab Middle East.

This paper takes a broad view of Islam and the Arab Middle East as a whole. It does not distinguish between different Muslim sects (i.e. Sunni, Shia), nor does it consider the fact that other religions have significant numbers of followers in the Arab Middle East (i.e. Christian Coptics in Egypt, Jews in Syria). While innumerable cultural conditions could define and describe the context of the Arab Middle East, the scope of this paper limits discussion to only a few key factors such as the patriarchal nature of society, the urbanization and literacy trend, the development of civil society organizations, views on human rights in the region, and region's swing towards religious fundamentalism.

It seems to be a commonly held belief by many that Islamic values are incompatible with the ideals of democracy, and that Islam's tight grasp on the Arab Middle East is the underpinning of authoritarian rule in the region. However, this paper takes the view that the reasons for a lack of democracy in the region go much deeper and seeks to understand the root issue.

The paper first reviews the West's interpretation of democracy, and then demonstrates that, even according to the West's interpretation, many scholars and experts construe Islam as not only compatible with democracy but also as demanding governance through many of the same ideals. Given that Islam is compatible with democracy, the paper builds a framework of some key cultural and historical elements to better understand the context of modern day Arab Middle East. Armed with this knowledge, the next step then is to compare material cultural and socioeconomic patterns in the Arab Middle East with similar patterns in other countries which have successfully integrated democratic principles in order to refine the root cause of this "democracy deficit"; post-World War II Italy presented very similar patterns in terms of religion, culture, and society. The case study pointed towards the contrary economic conditions and policies as the major difference between the two countries, and these economic conditions were premised on the rentier economies of the Arab Middle East. Further review clearly demonstrated that these economic conditions were an integral theme in practically all of the cultural and historical elements defining the modern Arab Middle East as well as the bedrock for the authoritarian regimes' power. Conditions created by these rentier economies enable the authoritarian regimes to maintain strict control over their social, economic, and political systems and thus delay the implementation of democratic ideals in the region.

Liberal Democracy

In his 2006 State of Union Address, President George Bush stated "democracies replace resentment with hope, respect the rights of their citizens and their neighbors, and join the fight against terror."¹ Spreading democracy throughout the world has been a linchpin in United States' foreign policy, but democracy can mean many things to many people.

In general, the concept of democracy entails “a form of government in which the right to make political decisions is exercised either directly by the people or through elected representatives.”² For many Westerners, the concept of democracy has evolved to mean a liberal democracy combining a constitution and numerous liberties with the rule of the people.³ Liberal democracy is defined as a “government of limited powers, operating under the rule of law in some meaningful system of checks and balances, which protects fundamental political, economic, and religious freedoms and in which minority rights are protected even from a majority.”⁴

While not inherent in this definition, many Westerners tend to take a minimalist view of democracy in general and liberal democracy in particular and to view the right of nearly all citizens to vote along with regular elections as the focal point of democracy.⁵ This notion in turn has led many in the West to incorrectly believe that democracy is a “distinctively and exclusively Western phenomenon with specific requirements.”⁶ It is important to note however, this concept of liberal democracy commonly accepted by the present-day Western world would vastly differ from the early democracies of Europe and the United States where large segments of their citizens were deprived of the right to vote and even many basic liberties by current standards.⁷

It is in this context that democracy has flourished in the vast majority of the world. In fact, some experts have gone so far as to describe democracy as the “sole surviving source of political legitimacy.”⁸ Yet this trend has had only minimal impact on the Muslim world.⁹ This paper seeks to determine why.

Islam's Influence on Government

Within the Muslim world, there exists a plethora of views on whether or not Islam lends itself to the support of a democratic form of government. Many conservative Muslim scholars (particularly radical Muslims) argue Islam and democracy are incompatible for three main reasons. First, they believe ideas about the sovereignty of the people in a democracy contradict the fundamental Islamic principle of the absolute sovereignty of God. Second, conservative scholars also believe the Shari'a (the law defined and disseminated by God) can not be altered by elected parliaments, and, third, to them the very concept of elected parliaments as sources of law is sacrilege. In these viewpoints, conservative Muslim scholars are paradoxically joined by some non-Muslim, Western scholars such as Bernard Lewis who also view Islam and democracy as incompatible.¹⁰ However, throughout history, just as many contemporary Muslim thinkers have disagreed with the structuring of such arguments.

Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan contends there is no ideal form of Islamic government, and an Islamic government should not remain static. He reasons the Qur'an and Sunna provide not only indispensable principles for governance, but also examples of how to implement those precepts in "specific historic context." As contexts change, the means of implementation of Islamic principles must also change. Ramadan points to the Islamic methodology of *ijtihad* which allows for "devising ways of accommodating changing circumstances while maintaining fidelity to Islamic principles."¹¹

Sheik Rachid Ghannouchi of Tunisia's al-Nahda party expands of this idea to argue that Islam actually supports the principles of democracy. He asserts that inherent in Islam is an unwavering responsibility to "protect certain essential human rights," and contends that

throughout Islam's history the critical issue for Muslims has been to actualize the needs of humans.¹² To accomplish this, Muslims must achieve essential goals of "independence, development, social solidarity, civil liberties, human rights, political pluralism, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, or liberty for mosques and Islamic activities."¹³ Sheik Ghannouchi links the concept of democracy with Islam by pointing out that justice is the law of God, and justice is perhaps the most important aspect of any Islamic government. From this construct, Ghannouchi says a "just government, even if not Islamic, is considered very close to the Islamic one."¹⁴

John Voll points out that many contemporary Muslim scholars maintain "democracy is the spirit of the Islamic governmental system, even though they reject its philosophical assumptions about the people's sovereignty."¹⁵ Such scholars interpret the Qur'an as not only commanding Muslims to govern through the concept of *shura* (or mutual consultation), but also authorizing *khilafah* (or representative agency) to the Muslim community as a whole instead of just a singular person or class of people. Muhammad Faour, a peace fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, explains mutual consultation "can be interpreted to justify the election of a representative body, as in the case of western democracies...but it is also consistent with the traditional tribal practice of consultation among heads of clans."¹⁶ Thus, contemporary Muslim scholars argue the logical extension of these concepts is a leader (or leaders) chosen by the free will of the Muslim community. In the minds of these scholars and many others, Qur'anic concepts such as these clearly demonstrate Islam's compatibility with the concept of democracy to such a degree that "Islamic principles demand secular democracy in today's world."¹⁷

Arab Cultural Context

At this point it is important to make the distinction between the terms *Muslim* and *Arab*, for they are often incorrectly used interchangeably. A Muslim is simply a person who adheres to the Islamic faith, and can reside anywhere in the world. An Arab, on the other hand, is a person who identifies as such on linguistic or cultural grounds. Although definitions of the Arab Middle East differ on the exact boundaries, the most commonly accepted boundaries include the countries of the Arab peninsula and the North African countries bordering the Mediterranean. William Baker defines the Arab Middle East as composing the countries of Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. However, the countries of Comoros, Djibouti, Somalia, the Sudan, and Mauritania (although majority black African countries) contain largely Muslim populations, speak Arabic, and are members of the Arab League. Palestine (although not an internationally recognized country) is also represented in the Arab League.¹⁸ Figure 1 portrays a map of the Arab Middle East. Neither Iran nor Turkey is considered an Arab country.

This paper uses the terms Arabia and Arab Middle East interchangeably, but one must keep in mind that a Muslim is completely distinct from these two terms. To crystallize the point, it may be helpful to understand that only approximately 20% of the world's Muslims reside within this definition of the Arab Middle East.¹⁹

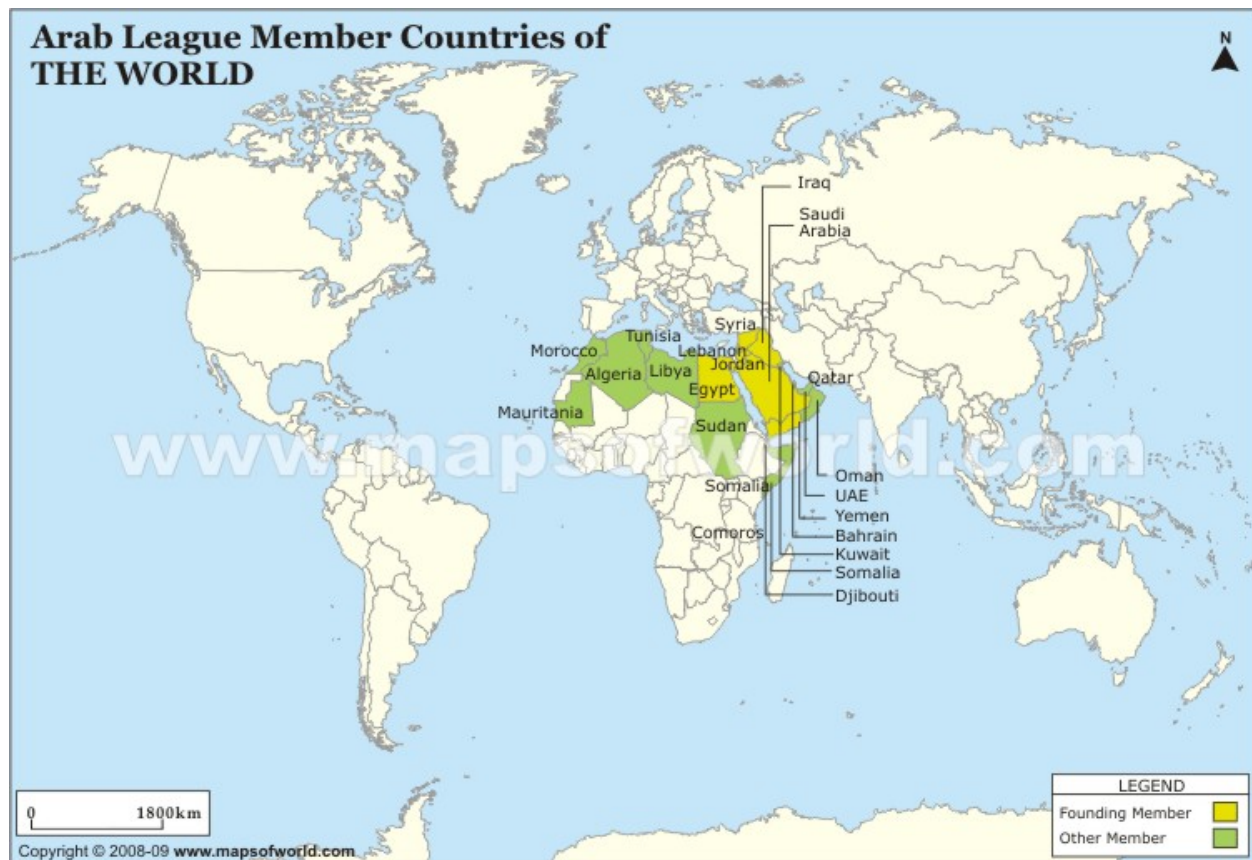


Figure 1. Map of the Arab Middle East²⁰

If then, Islam is not per se antidemocratic as has been argued and if, as many contend, Islam actually espouses many principles commonly intertwined with democracy, why has the trend toward democracy not caught on with the Muslim world, and in particular the Arab world? This paper contends that understanding cultural aspects of the Arab world is key in understanding the context of the Arab world as a whole, but that these cultural aspects are only a part of the reason democracy has failed to take hold in the Arab Middle East. This paper reviews Arab cultural elements such as the patriarchal nature of society, the trends of urbanization and increased literacy, civil societies, human rights, and religious fundamentalism.

Patriarchal Society

At its core, the social structure of Arab culture is “very authoritarian.”²¹ In the family structure, the father retains almost total authority. The patriarch tends to allow very little dissent within the family and expects strict obedience to his dominion. This construct is also projected onto the society in general with people in positions of authority “project[ing] a paternal image” and demanding the same level of monopolistic authority.²² The result of such society tends to be that the society is controlled by people who came into power based on personal trust and/or kinships.²³ Richard Haass, former director of State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, explains “patriarchal societies in which women play a subservient role to men are also societies in which men play subservient roles to other men, and meritocracy takes a back seat to connections and cronyism.”²⁴ Michael Minkenberg sees the Arab world’s “democratic deficit” as primarily being caused by the patriarchal nature of the societies and the subjugation of its women.²⁵ This paper disagrees however. The patriarchal nature of society is an important cultural element, but, as is demonstrated later in this paper, it is not necessarily in and of itself a barrier to democracy.

Urbanization and Literacy

Urbanization and literacy are also integral factors inextricably tied together and important to understanding the current context of the Arab Middle East. Through much of the 20th century, a large portion of the Arab Middle East populace was illiterate, living in what might be considered rural villages and small towns. Their version of Islam could be described as a pluralistic and tolerant “kind of village Islam that adapted itself to local cultures.”²⁶ However, by the 1970s, a large portion of the populace urbanized, and, as a result, their religion was no longer grounded to a specific place. At the same time, society (especially the young) was becoming more literate.

In their new, urbanized setting, Arabs soon discovered that “a new Islam was being preached...the Islam of the high church.”²⁷ This new Islam contained angry and austere overtones, and often focused that anger on the West. Fanned by the growing literacy rate, these new theories quickly spread across the Arab Middle East. Interestingly, they appealed less to downtrodden as one might expect but more to the newly educated, urbanized masses.

To the poor, the West still held magic for it often provided the very food and medicine necessary for their existence.²⁸ But the newly educated, urbanized middle class eagerly aspired to demonstrate their rise from “rustic backwardness and ignorance to urban sophistication and propriety.”²⁹ Yet this longing often only left them disoriented; their identity had been separated from their historical context of “village, lineage, clan or tribe.”³⁰ This new, strict interpretation of Islam stood ready to solve their disorientation and point them on their true path.³¹

Civil Society Organizations

Civil societies are another important aspect of understanding the cultural context of the Arab Middle East. Phil Oxhorn defines civil society as “a rich social fabric formed by a multiplicity of territorially and functionally based units.” These civil society organizations (CSO) operate openly in public pursuit of their shared interests and in competition with one another. Thus, Oxhorn points out, strong CSOs are integral to “a high level of institutionalized social pluralism.”³²

CSOs ranging from merchant guilds to educational institutions and to professional associations have historically existed in the Arab Middle East but have operated in “highly hostile political and economic environments.” As a result, CSOs in the Arab Middle East typically have been disjointed and incapable of developing interrelated associations. Mehran

Kamrava declares that CSOs in the Arab Middle East have largely failed to bring about a political society chiefly because the Arab Middle East states fear social autonomy may lead to erosion of their ability to coerce their society. Consequently, the pattern of state dependent economic development in the Arab Middle East has made CSOs dependent on the state for their survival and undermined their ability to act independently.³³ Further, the middle classes are critical components of CSOs, but they require political autonomy and the financial and organizational resources necessary to rally themselves into professional and other society organizations.³⁴ This is a key point and its relevance will become evident as this paper progresses.

Human Rights

The concept of human rights as they pertain to the Arab Middle East is often misconstrued by the West. Political scientist Mumtaz Ahmad points out that within Islam some “rights” are discerned as “obligations and duties of individuals” rather than “rights” of individuals as human rights have become to be understood in the West.³⁵ Arab Middle Eastern society emphasizes the right of the community over the rights of individuals, and in this sense they are more communitarian rather than individualists. They also tend to view human rights in a broader sense to encompass not only social rights but also economic rights. As one may expect, they believe the rights set forth in Islam have been divinely ordained and are thus superior to any version of secular based human rights.³⁶ However, international human rights researcher and Wharton School of Business professor Ann Mayer notes that Islamic law is often used as an excuse by Arab Middle Eastern governments as justification for not complying with many international human rights norms. In her view, the regimes of the Arab Middle East are

the major source of the abuse of human rights in the region as “most of the rights violations significantly have nothing to do whatsoever with the requirements of Islamic law.”³⁷

Religious Fundamentalism

Religious fundamentalism is the last major Arab Middle Eastern cultural element this paper will review. Political scientist Gehad Auda defines religious fundamentalism as making uncompromising judgments and decisions based on belief in religious scriptures without considering the variables of modern life. In the case of Islamic fundamentalism, these sources are the Qur'an and the Sunna.³⁸ The Qur'an contains the words of Allah (God) as spoken to the Prophet Muhammad, whereas the Sunna are examples and teachings from the Prophet's life and are documented in the hadith.³⁹ The Sunna is subordinate to the Qur'an, but gives amplifying guidance on issues not specifically addressed in the Qur'an.

This phenomenon of fundamentalism is certainly not limited to Islam, and thus Islamic fundamentalism should not be considered as correspondent to extremism or radicalism.⁴⁰ In many ways, Islamic fundamentalism has evolved based on the cultural elements previously mentioned, and, as one may expect, Islam's hold over the Muslim population of the Arab Middle East has “markedly strengthened” over the last several decades.⁴¹ For many Muslims of the Arab Middle East, Islamic fundamentalism fulfills a void which nationalism has been unable to fill; it “provide[s] a new self-image for people no longer able to identify with their position in village, lineage, clan or tribe.” Largely as a result of urbanization, the groupings of village, lineage, and clan no longer exist in the traditional Arab sense. A fundamental interpretation of Islam serves as a powerful cultural link for Arab Muslims in this new, internally mobile

society.⁴² This developing conservative bias in many Arab Middle Eastern societies has been referred to as the “Islamic Awakening.”⁴³

Arab Historical Context

An understanding of key Arab cultural elements can be more completely appreciated by further exploring the modern historical context of the Arab Middle East. An understanding of the contemporary evolution of Arab Middle Eastern government and knowledge of the impacts of globalization and modernization shed further light on the “democracy deficit” in the Arab Middle East.

Evolution of Modern Arab Government

For the sake of simplicity, this paper reviews the evolution of government in the Arab Middle East in four main phases from the turn of the twentieth century to present time: colonialization, Arab nationalism, secular dictatorships, and political fundamentalism or Islamism. It is, however, important to keep in mind that these phases are not necessarily separate and independent but, in many ways, inextricably linked.

As the twentieth century began practically all the Muslim world (not just the Arab Middle East) was colonized by the great-powers of the world.⁴⁴ The arbitrary territorial borders of the resulting new colonial nations, especially Arab Middle Eastern nations, now contained a variety of Muslim societies which “previously had no collective identity.”⁴⁵ The colonial institutions set forth by the ruling world powers only tended to reinforce the patriarchal, authoritarian nature of the Arab Middle East with power often wrested in hereditary monarchies. However, some parliamentary systems based on Western models were beginning to emerge.⁴⁶

These colonial and post-colonial states possessed transportation, communication, and military technologies superior to and in greater quantities to any other “self-administering units which had previously successfully defied the central state,” and, accordingly, the new nations rapidly consolidated power.⁴⁷ As these states gained independence, the concepts of authoritarianism, autocracy, and imperialism formed the framework of political systems of the Arab Middle East.⁴⁸ The product was politically centralized governments imposing a unified economic system on a diverse populace with few cultural links and no common identity.⁴⁹ Yet by many, this “autocratic imperialism” was seen as an instrument of reform and modernization enabling the Arab Middle East to evolve with the changing times.

Imperial influence in most of the world rapidly declined as World War II drew to a close, and Nationalism soon rose to dominate Arab politics.⁵⁰ Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt in many ways spearheaded the Arab Nationalist movement in the Arab Middle East, and believed Arab politics required an infusion of ideas such as “self-determination, socialism, and Arab unity.”⁵¹ While such notions may have been modern and inspired by anti-colonialism, Fareed Zakaria points out the ideas were ironically also very Western notions of government.

Nasser rose to prominence through the ranks of the Egyptian Army, and his consolidation of power in Egypt was seen by Muslims of the Arab Middle East as “achieving their dreams of independence” from “colonial governors and decadent kings.” Zakaria notes that the Arab world “desperately wanted to become modern,” and it saw Nationalism’s embodiment of Western ideas as its path to modernity. “Nasser’s vision became the region’s.”⁵²

Nationalism may have been spurred by anti-colonial idealism and framed by Western notions, but it too helped cement the power of secular, military dictatorships in the region. By

the 1960s, secular, military rule routinely replaced the remnant parliamentary systems of the post-colonial states. Again, many outside observers saw this as yet another necessary stage in the modernization process of the Arab Middle East for they viewed the military as ‘the spearhead of modernization in politics, economics, and society.’⁵³ Secularism in the Arab Middle East came to be embodied by leaders such as Saddam Hussein, Muammar Kaddafi, Hosni Mubarak, and Yasir Arafat.⁵⁴

For the people of the Arab Middle East, this newest evolution of secular government was just the latest form of government to be imposed upon them. As Reuel Gerecht noted, an expression some attribute to the Prophet Muhammad probably best sums up the Muslim perspective of government: “Fear God and obey him; and if a flat-nosed shrunken-headed Abyssinian slave is invested with power over you, hearken to him and obey him.” These same words were often used to justify obedience to military rulers.⁵⁵

History clearly demonstrates the tyranny and stagnation of the Hussein, Kaddafi, and Arafat regimes. As a result, many in the Arab Middle East felt they tried Western-style politics, infused with self-determination and secularization, but these paths only seemed to turn into dead ends.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, many in the Arab Middle East have reasonably but unjustly correlated the abuses of their modern governments with the failure of Western ideals of government. Zakaria astutely observed the “Arab world is disillusioned with the West when it should be disillusioned with its own leaders.”⁵⁷

As the twentieth century wound down, from the Arab viewpoint, the “ideologies” of nationalism, socialism, and secularism were being discredited and a void was created. Around this same time period, the Arab Middle East was experiencing an “Islamic Awakening,” and this

same fundamentalism flowed into the political arena. Islamist political fundamentalists soon rushed to fill the perceived ideological void.⁵⁸ The Islamists embraced many of the roles once fulfilled by earlier nationalist movements, utilizing Islam as their doctrinal tool. Scholar Quintan Wiktorowicz noted “Islamic activism is rooted in the symbolism, language, and cultural history of Muslim society and as a result has successfully resonated with increasingly disillusioned populations suffering from political exclusion, economic deprivation, and a sense of growing impotence at the expense of outside powers and a faceless process of globalization.”⁵⁹

Some Islamist groups have proven masterful in mobilizing the lower middle classes of their societies and, in effect, liberating this previously inconsequential class of society.⁶⁰ High unemployment rates and the relatively weak economies of many Arab Middle Eastern states serve to further intensify the seductiveness of political Islam.⁶¹ Islamic political fundamentalism also allowed the growing number of religious fundamentalists the opportunity to cast aside their perceptions of failure, alienation, and powerlessness as it “evoke[d] authenticity, pride, cultural assertiveness and defiance.”⁶² Professor of Arab Middle East studies Fouad Ajami observes that Islamic political fundamentalism appealed to the masses because it “invited men to participate...[in] contrast to a political culture that reduces citizens to spectators and asks them to leave things to their rulers...it connects them to a tradition that reduces bewilderment.”⁶³ “Islam is the solution” has emerged as a common Islamist slogan and their answer to the socioeconomic problems facing the Arab Middle East.⁶⁴ Perhaps in keeping with the Prophet Muhammad’s reflection on power as noted previously, Ernest Gellner advances that as long as Islamists allow and encourage “severe and fastidious...implementation of the sacred prescriptions,” religious fundamentalists will not be “over-sensitive” to the Islamists use or abuse of political authority. He notes, in modern Arab Middle Eastern politics “nothing else is expected.”⁶⁵

In a sense, the evolution of Islamic political fundamentalism was inevitable once the “Islamic Awakening” took hold in society. Society and its governments had unfolded so that mosques were among the few places where open political discussion could not be banned. Subsequently, mosques became the focal point for hatred and opposition toward the authoritarian regimes and the powers that supported them (namely the United States). Zakaria notes the “result has been a ruthless, winner-take-all attitude toward political life.”⁶⁶

Some observers have characterized Islamic political fundamentalism as an aberration in time, for, at its core, it is “reactive and reactionary.” Professor of Legal Studies Ann Mayer notes, eventually “you run out of things to react to.” However, Professor of Arab Middle Eastern Studies Richard Bulliet disagrees that Islamic fundamentalism (both religious and political) is a passing phenomenon. He views the “Islamic Awakening” as having become integrally woven into the lives of Arab Middle Eastern Muslims to the point it has become unalterable.⁶⁷

Globalization and Modernization

*...increasingly educated populations seeking to join the global economy...huge gaps between the numbers of entrants into the job market and the number of jobs available, education systems that failed to produce graduates suited for the needs of the global economy, and paltry foreign direct investment outside the oil and gas sectors.*⁶⁸

Amy Hawthorne

The last key element this paper will discuss in understanding the present context of the Arab Middle East is an understanding of how globalization and modernization has impacted the region. While globalization has brought prosperity and ushered in democracy to much of the rest of the world, Zakaria notes that is “has hit the Arab world in a strange way. Its societies are open enough to be disrupted by modernity, but not so open that they can ride the wave.”⁶⁹ He goes

even further in saying that the Arab Middle East, and especially the Gulf States, has “gotten a bastardized version of modernization.”⁷⁰ For the aristocracy and upper class of Arab Middle Eastern societies, globalization has presented the opportunity to buy practically any good or service which can be imported from abroad. Indeed, foreign imports often became even more desirable as a symbol of prestige.⁷¹

However, for much of the rest of Arab Middle Eastern society, globalization has only served to open their eyes to an endless stream of products, services, and even cultures which remain beyond their grasp. Globalization has not succeeded in bringing liberal reform to their societies or, for the most part, even provided greater economic opportunities to the masses: “even the workers [are] imported from abroad.”⁷² In the end, globalization has further disoriented Arab Middle Eastern society. The masses are fascinated with Western products and culture yet repulsed that they cannot share in the bounties. The elite certainly benefit, but, at the same time, their base of power is threatened.⁷³

Unsurprisingly, Islamists have latched onto this contradiction to become outspoken critics of globalization. They view globalization’s economic and cultural framework as being “alien to Muslim values,” and lambaste continued efforts to integrate the Arab Middle East. Ironically, Islamists may have benefited the most from globalization’s resulting freer flow of information by enabling them to mobilize their supporters and focus their message.⁷⁴

Pattern of Development – Authoritarian States

Thus far, this paper has sought to build the broad picture of the cultural, governmental, and, to a small degree, economic context of present day Arab Middle East. A key pattern in this context is the development of authoritarian states. Shireen Hunter and Huma Malik point out

that a critical element of the abiding authoritarian character of Arab Middle Eastern government has been the government's ability to foster "ruling bargains" in which the government promises "to ward off external threats and to provide economic prosperity in exchange for the delaying of democratic rule."⁷⁵ As such, the state remains dominant "holding social groups dependent on it for its largesse."⁷⁶ However, most of the Arab Middle Eastern governments have "failed to deliver on their part of the bargain" while at the same time delaying democracy to the greatest extent possible.⁷⁷ Instead, the authoritarian regimes often use the excuses of terrorism and religious extremism to justify their antidemocratic policies.⁷⁸

The nongovernmental agency Freedom House's annual report on global political and civil rights characterizes the levels of freedom in regions throughout the world. Consistently, governments of the Arab Middle East garner the very lowest rankings in the survey even in comparison with other predominately Muslim Third World nations as reflected in table 1. John Esposito, Loyola Professor of Arab Middle East Studies at the College of the Holy Cross, notes that political realities "have not been *conducive* to the development" of democracy in the region.⁷⁹ "Thus the Arab Middle East," notes Daniel Brumberg of the U.S. Institute of Peace "has proven one of the most democracy resistant regions of the world."⁸⁰

Table 1. Regional Patterns of Democracy⁸¹

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2009 REGIONAL PATTERNS			
	Free	Partly Free	Not Free
Americas	25 (71%)	9 (26%)	1 (3%)
Asia-Pacific	16 (41%)	15 (38%)	8 (21%)
Central and Eastern Europe/Former Soviet Union	13 (46%)	8 (29%)	7 (25%)
Arab Middle East and North Africa	1 (6%)	6 (33%)	11 (61%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	10 (21%)	23 (48%)	15 (31%)
Western Europe	24 (96%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)

Case Study – Post World War II Europe and Modern Arab Middle East

With a better understanding of key cultural and historical elements of the Arab Middle East, this paper will compare some of these very same elements which led to rapid social, economic, and governmental development in post-WWII Italy with the current environment in the Arab Middle East. If the current political realities in the Arab Middle East are “not conducive” to development as John Esposito noted, this case study will help point to the reason why.

Postwar Europe’s Development

Social scientist Heather Deegan, observed that post-WWII, 1950s Italy could be characterized by the “extreme backwardness of peasant culture” in parts of the country, as well as the “inability of villagers to act together for their common good or, indeed, for any good transcending the immediate material interest of the family.”⁸² Religion was paramount in almost

all aspects of peasant society. Specifically, the Catholic church dominated the culture of peasant society through interventions such as “rural banks, co-operatives, charities, education programs, and youth work.”⁸³ Consequently, peasant society had become “defensive and inward looking.”⁸⁴

Within two decades however, Italy’s society and economy had transformed. Deegan notes that by the 1970s Italian per capita income had largely caught up with other European societies even as “religion continued to be an important element of Italian culture.”⁸⁵ “Massive internal migration” and small-scale industrialization laid the framework for this “economic miracle”.⁸⁶

Between 1952 and 1962, approx 15.5 million Italians changed residence largely to more urban regions of the North of which the vast majority were young adults seeking to “escape the oppression of the extended family.”⁸⁷ Open economic policies allowed this new generation significantly more entrepreneurial independence directly contributing to the buildup of small-scale industrialization. Deegan observed this “amalgam of economic and social changes led to a significant shift in the cultural paradigm of Italy in a relatively short period.”⁸⁸

Within similar time frames, comparable social and economic development was seen in Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Ireland “against the backdrop of the social and cultural influences of the Catholic Church.”⁸⁹ However, one must note that external factors such as the Marshall Plan and the European Union were especially important in helping to initiate and cement much of the economic expansion observed in these countries.⁹⁰

These scenarios seem to indicate that rural, peasant societies enveloped and dominated by religion can drastically change not only its culture but also its entire social and economic structure.

Modern Day Arab Middle East Comparison

Today's Arab Middle East presents an interesting comparison to post-WWII Europe. As in the case of post-war Italy, the Arab Middle East is strongly rooted to its patriarchal, village culture background, and yet went through a very similar pattern of migration and urbanization. Subsequently, its cultural and society system shows a very similar pattern in moving from a loose, decentralized network of tribes or families to a more centralized organization. Additionally, religion has a similarly long history of dominating the society and its culture.

Unfortunately, scenarios in the regions have unfolded very differently. While every Western European government has evolved to embrace democratic principles, Arab Middle Eastern governments remain decidedly authoritarian.⁹¹ So why have regions with similar patterns of culture, religion, society, and urbanization evolved governments at opposite ends of the spectrum?

Many point to some of the same cultural elements mentioned above as the underlying reason for the "democracy deficit" in the Arab Middle East. While cultural elements are very important to understanding the Arab Middle East and strongly influence individual and institutional decisions, history shows that a society's culture can change to support democratic ideals, and that strongly held convictions regarding family and community are not necessarily "detrimental to socioeconomic growth."⁹² Italy was (and still is) a very patriarchal society dominated by religion, and was acutely fragmented with the peasant population displaying little

concern for anything beyond their immediate well-being. However, culture and society adapted to eventually embrace democratic ideals. Indeed, culture and society in the Arab Middle Eastern have adapted and changed. So this paper contends that cultural elements of the Arab Middle East do not explain the underlying problem of the “democracy deficit,” but instead point towards a deeper underlying problem.

The domination of Islam over all aspects of life in the region has also been submitted as an answer. In fact, the separation of church and state did play a role in the European cases, but countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia all contain Muslim majority populations yet have evolved into various forms of secular, somewhat democratic governments. Additionally, as the previous evidence reveals, Islam holds dear many of the same principles embodied within democracy; Islam, in and of itself, does not appear to answer the question. Results of a study by Norris and Inglehart reveal that “compared with Western societies, there were no significant differences between the publics living in the West and in Muslim religious cultures in approval of how democracy works in practice, in support for democratic ideals, and in approval of strong leadership.”⁹³

Rentier Economies of the Arab Middle East

*The problem is wealth, not poverty. Regimes that get rich through natural resources tend never to develop, modernize, or gain legitimacy. Easy money means little economic or political modernization. The unearned income relieves the government of the need to tax its people-and in return provide something to them in the form of accountability, transparency, even representation. Middle East regimes ask nothing from their people and, in return, give little to them.*⁹⁴

Fareed Zakaria

If key components of the Arab Middle East such as culture and religion do not explain the continuing pattern of authoritarian government in the region, what then is the answer? The economic conditions enabled by “rentierism”, a phenomenon almost exclusive to the Arab Middle East, are the bedrock foundation upon which authoritarian regimes in the region rest.

Hossein Mahdavy developed the concept of a “rentier state” as a “country that receive[s] on a regular basis substantial amounts of external economic rent.”⁹⁵ Hazim Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani extended the concept to develop the model of a “rentier economy” in which rent plays a major role, and in which that rent is external to the economy.”⁹⁶ In the case of the Arab Middle East, this rent chiefly takes the form of direct oil revenues. Of course, not all Arab Middle East countries (notably Morocco and Tunisia) have plentiful petroleum resources, and, as such, their economies do not reflect such rentier models. The evolution of governments in the Arab Middle East with rentier economies appears to be quite different from governments without such rentier economies.

Kamrava notes that “rentierism” has given authoritarian regimes of the Arab Middle East “extractive autonomy from society by enabling them to provide for the population without demanding much in direct taxation.”⁹⁷ Another key to this notion is that the authoritarian regimes not only provide for the population but they also provide for CSOs (as mentioned earlier) thus making CSOs financially dependent on the government.⁹⁸

It may seem counterintuitive that a state’s ability to so completely provide for its people without asking for much in return could play such a destabilizing factor to the spread of Democracy. However, Yates points out that rentierism “violates the most sacred doctrine of the liberal ethos: hard work.”⁹⁹ Rentierism, he concludes, tends to perpetuate “unproductive, almost

antisocial societies,” for the benefits of the wealth “do not come as the result of work, but rather as the result of chance or situation.”¹⁰⁰ Yet, those who do persist in attempting to get ahead through old fashioned hard work often find their path blocked; “access is a matter of whom one knows rather than what one knows.”¹⁰¹

Beyond the psychological effect upon the population, rentierism has the further consequence of actually draining resources from other sectors of the economy. Yates notes that in rentier economies “petroleum industries...tend to be enclave industries that generate few backward or forward linkages.”¹⁰² Simply stated, due to the highly technical nature of the equipment, the industry imports rather than domestically purchases most of such equipment (and even its jobs). Further, the resultant product (in this case oil) is to a very large degree exported for external use and paid for in foreign currency. Consequently, the state often eases “constraints on foreign exchange” thus facilitating a freer flow of equipment and resources into and out of the country.¹⁰³ Unfortunately, this reduction in exchange costs only tends to increase the importation of foreign goods in other sectors of the economy as well. This seems to be yet another form of the “bastardized version of modernization” Zakaria noted, and Yates observes this increased reliance on imports particularly impacts agricultural and manufacturing sectors which often employ “poorer groups left outside the booming oil economy.”¹⁰⁴

The economic conditions created by the rentier economies of the Arab Middle East directly contribute to a psychologically flawed work ethic within the Arab population, an actual weakness within the private sector, and an excessive role of the state in all aspects of a society thus enabling the authoritarian regimes of the Arab Middle East. Such great wealth not only provides the means for authoritarian regimes to control its economy, but also provides a means to control its society and to resist most democratic efforts. As noted previously, CSOs are integral

in furthering democratic ideals in that they build the framework of an institutionalized society. CSOs in the Arab Middle East have failed in part because the economic conditions of these rentier economies have not enabled CSOs to operate independently of the state and are thus unable to challenge the authoritarian state in any meaningful fashion.¹⁰⁵

Neither has the private sector of the Arab Middle East shown any real ability to change nor the desire to challenge their authoritarian regime's grasp on power. Kamrava recognized that "[f]or the private sector's defection to be politically consequential it needs to have formidable economic muscle and organizational and financial strength."¹⁰⁶ As seen, not only does rentierism stifle the economic conditions for a private sector to build such muscle, but authoritarian regimes are also loath to facilitate a powerful private sector. Political scientist Eva Bellin refers to this as the "Developmental Paradox...by sponsoring industrialization, the [authoritarian] state nurtures the development of social forces ultimately capable of amassing sufficient power to challenge it and imposes a measure of policy responsiveness. In short, the very success of the state's strategy leads to the demise of the state's capacity to dictate policy unilaterally."¹⁰⁷

Fortuitously, the world-wide economic recessions in 1980s and 1990s did reveal chinks in the armor of the "ruling bargains" of the authoritarian regimes. Kamrava notes the "significant decline in rent revenues" resulting from world-wide recessions directly impacted the regimes' ability to fulfill their part of the economic bargain to their population. Accordingly, the regimes implemented "certain economic liberalization measures" however; he observed these "half-hearted measures at economic liberalization have not been followed up by meaningful political liberalization."¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Elements of culture are important to understanding the Arab Middle East, but only insofar as to show one how society developed. Cultural elements, however, do not explain the “democracy deficit” in the Arab Middle East. Recent history also is helpful in understanding the pattern of authoritarian governments in the region, but neither culture nor religion explains the persistence of such regimes while the majority of the world embraces democratic ideals of government. In fact, many scholars believe Islam not only is compatible with democracy but also demands representative and consultative rule. As Heather Deegan concluded, differences among societies throughout the Muslim world “indicate that Islam can be neither ‘the’ question nor ‘the’ answer. What a mistake to try to identify religion with society or to claim that religion can determine society.”¹⁰⁹

Religion, culture, and the evolution of government are all important elements in understanding how patterns of authoritarian government may develop. However, as in the case of post-WWII Italy, social changes such as migration and urbanization can directly influence economic, cultural, and political aspects of a society. The Arab Middle East experienced many of the same social changes as did post-WWII Italy, yet the stories unfolded very differently. As such, these elements of religion and culture can not fully explain the authoritarian regimes’ near complete control of their social, economic, and political systems at a time when democratic ideals are flourishing throughout much of the rest of the world.

The economic conditions created by the rentier economies of the Arab Middle East prove to be the common thread binding together elements of culture, economic growth,

fundamentalism (both religious and political), modernization, globalization, and authoritarian regimes. Mass urbanization (most often seeking economic prosperity) eventually led to a frustrated and disoriented society. With its value system in disarray and no common identity, society turned to the known element of Islam and the new fundamental interpretation to heal its wounds. At the same time, the massive wealth resulting from rentierism allowed the authoritarian regimes to provide for its population while asking little in return. Civil society organizations exist, but their economic dependence on the state fragmented any efforts furthering socioeconomic or political change. Thus, society's economic dependence on its authoritarian rulers furthered their frustration and humiliation. Great wealth was prevalent, but society contributed very little to its accumulation.

Additionally, the trends of globalization and modernization even further fanned the anger and frustration of the lower and middle classes. The benefits of globalization were openly on display seemingly throughout the rest of the world and certainly for the upper classes in the Arab Middle East, however these benefits did not always extend to the lower and middle classes. The economic conditions resultant from these rentier economies not only helped fuel the gravy train of foreign revenue, but also flooded the market with foreign imports at the expense of domestic industry and jobs. All the while, the authoritarian regimes grew richer, their overall economies stagnated (beyond the rentier economy), socioeconomic dependencies grew ever stronger, and religious fundamentalism proliferated throughout the Arab Middle East.

Oil and the resulting rentier economies have proven to be a double edged sword for the Arab Middle East. Oil has brought rapid and almost unimaginable wealth to many countries of the Arab Middle East, yet the conditions created by these rentier economies have only furthered society's economic and political dependence on their authoritarian regimes. Instead of ushering

in a new age of modernization and liberalization, rentier economies based on oil have enabled continued authoritarian rule over Arab Middle East societies.

In the face of such conditions, the links that bond people to their leaders, government, and even their country are likely to become weaker and weaker with populations turning elsewhere for the security and stability they desire in their lives. As we've seen, stronger bonds have been, and will continue to be, built along communal, ethnic, and religious lines. If governments of rentier economies in the region continue to maintain the status quo of such rentier systems, these stronger bonds below the national level are likely to only further fragment societies.

Notes

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- ¹ Fareed Zakaria, *Islam and Power*, 2.
- ² Dr. Walter Gary Sharp Sr., *Democracy and Deterrence: Foundations for an Enduring World Peace*, 2-3.
- ³ Shireen T. Hunter and Huma Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 86.
- ⁴ Dr. Walter Gary Sharp Sr, *Democracy and Deterrence*, 2-3.
- ⁵ Timothy D. Sisk, *Islam and Democracy: Religion, Politics, and Power in the Middle East*, 8.
- ⁶ Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 86.
- ⁷ Ibid, 14.
- ⁸ Ibid, 87.
- ⁹ Ibid, 87.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, 83-84.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 76-77.
- ¹² Ibid, 75-76.
- ¹³ Ibid, 75-76.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 75-76.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 84.
- ¹⁶ Sisk, *Islam and Democracy*, 18-19.
- ¹⁷ Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 79, 328.
- ¹⁸ William G. Baker, *The Cultural Heritage of Arabs, Islam, and the Middle East*, 6.
- ¹⁹ Zakaria, *Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism*, 5.
- ²⁰ Maps of the World, Arab League Member Countries, <http://www.mapsofworld.com/thematic-maps/maps/world-arab-league-countries-map.jpg> (accessed 19 March 2009).
- ²¹ Ibid, 4.
- ²² Ibid, 4.
- ²³ Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals*, 27.
- ²⁴ Reuel Marc Gerecht, *The Islamic Paradox: Shiite Clerics, Sunni Fundamentalists, and the Coming of Arab Democracy*, 9.
- ²⁵ Michael Minkenberg, "Democracy and Religion: Theoretical and Empirical Observations on the Relationship between Christianity, Islam and Liberal Democracy.", 902
- ²⁶ Zakaria, *Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism*, 7.
- ²⁷ Ibid, 7.
- ²⁸ Ibid, 7.
- ²⁹ Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, 21-22.
- ³⁰ Ibid, 24.
- ³¹ Zakaria, *Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism*, 7.
- ³² Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 58.
- ³³ Ibid, 58-59.
- ³⁴ Ibid, 54.
- ³⁵ Sisk, *Islam and Democracy*, 26-27.
- ³⁶ Ibid, 26-27.
- ³⁷ Ibid, 26-29.
- ³⁸ Ibid, 22.
- ³⁹ Lippman, *Understanding Islam*, 4.

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- ⁴⁰ Sisk, *Islam and Democracy*, 22.
- ⁴¹ Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, 15.
- ⁴² Ibid, 23-24.
- ⁴³ Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway. *Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones.*, 8.
- ⁴⁴ Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 13.
- ⁴⁵ Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, 22.
- ⁴⁶ Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 91.
- ⁴⁷ Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, 21.
- ⁴⁸ Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 91.
- ⁴⁹ Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, 21.
- ⁵⁰ Amy Hawthorne, *Political Reform In The Arab World: A New Ferment?*, 4.
- ⁵¹ Zakaria, *Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism*, 4-5.
- ⁵² Ibid, 4-5.
- ⁵³ Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 91.
- ⁵⁴ Zakaria, *Islam and Power*, 2.
- ⁵⁵ Gerech, *The Islamic Paradox*, 44-45.
- ⁵⁶ Zakaria, *Islam and Power*, 2.
- ⁵⁷ Zakaria, *Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism*, 6.
- ⁵⁸ Sisk, *Islam and Democracy*, 42.
- ⁵⁹ Jeremy M. Sharp, *U.S. Democracy Promotion Policy in the Middle East: The Islamist Dilemma.*, 3.
- ⁶⁰ Sisk, *Islam and Democracy*, 56.
- ⁶¹ Ibid, 11.
- ⁶² Zakaria, *Islam and Power*, 3.
- ⁶³ Zakaria, *Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism*, 7.
- ⁶⁴ Sharp, Jeremy M., *U.S. Democracy Promotion Policy*, 3.
- ⁶⁵ Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, 23.
- ⁶⁶ Zakaria, *Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism*, 7.
- ⁶⁷ Sisk, *Islam and Democracy*, 60.
- ⁶⁸ Hawthorne, *Political Reform Arab World*, 8.
- ⁶⁹ Zakaria, *Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism*, 6.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid, 6.
- ⁷¹ Douglas A. Yates, *The Rentier State in Africa: Oil Rent Dependency and Neocolonialism in the Republic of Gabon.*, 26.
- ⁷² Zakaria, *Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism*, 6.
- ⁷³ Ibid, 6.
- ⁷⁴ Daniel Brumberg, *Democratization Versus Liberalization in the Arab World: Dilemmas and Challenges for U.S. Foreign Policy.*, 10.
- ⁷⁵ Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 5, 61.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid, 61.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid, 5.
- ⁷⁸ Arch Puddington, "Freedom in the World 2009: Setbacks and Resilience", Freedom House, http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw09/FIW09_OverviewEssay_Final.pdf, 9 (accessed 21 January 2009).

- ⁷⁹ Sisk, *Islam and Democracy*, 10-11.
- ⁸⁰ Brumberg, *Democratization Versus Liberalization Arab*, 3.
- ⁸¹ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2009", 10. Represents the number and percentage of countries in the region assessed as meeting each criteria.
- ⁸² Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 24-25.
- ⁸³ Ibid, 24-25.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid, 24-25.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid, 24-26.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid, 24-26.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid, 24-26.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid, 24-26.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid, 24-26.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid, 24-26.
- ⁹¹ Puddington, 10.
- ⁹² Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 26.
- ⁹³ Minkenberg, "Democracy and Religion", 903.
- ⁹⁴ Zakaria, *Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism*, 6.
- ⁹⁵ Yates, *Rentier State Africa*, 11.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid, 13.
- ⁹⁷ Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 60.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid, 60.
- ⁹⁹ Yates, *Rentier State Africa*, 18.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 21.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid, 29.
- ¹⁰² Ibid, 23.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid, 24.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 24-25.
- ¹⁰⁵ Hunter and Malik, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam*, 56.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 54.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 53.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 60.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 50.

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