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PROSPECTS FOR PALESTINIAN DEMOCRATIZATION

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The Arab world has generally been the exception to the wave of democratization that has swept the rest of the world since the demise of the Soviet Union. Although governments in Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar and Yemen did initiate limited reforms and held elections to municipalities and national assemblies, effective power in all Arab countries remains the monopoly of the rulers, who rely on their security apparatuses and the military.

One reason for this "Arab exception" is the weakness of the middle class, the backbone of any democracy, due to the failure of industrialization in the first part of the 20th Century and the nationalization of the economy by military regimes since the 1950s. Ever since then, civil society that could impose limits on the arbitrary power of the state has remained weak.

But this is not the sole explanation. The traumatic encounter between traditional Arab society and the West since the early 19th Century produced a distorted modernization that failed to adopt the liberal aspects of western culture. Instead, it preserved authoritarian socio-cultural structures, sustained by traditional Islamic political culture that cherished obedience to authority. Modern technologies of political control and authoritarian ideologies simply enhanced these structures. One outcome was that Arab intellectuals gave higher priority to national goals -- the restoration of Arab power,

the attainment of Arab unity, and the struggle against Israel -- than to democratization. The ongoing conflict with Israel also served as a pretext for rulers to avoid democratization.

The spread of Islamist ideology led to the growing identification of liberal democratic values with the hostile West, hence, as destructive to authentic Islamic culture. At the same time, Islamist terrorism, particularly in Algeria and Egypt, pushed large segments of the "silent majority" to prefer authoritarian rulers as the lesser evil.

President Bush's call for new Palestinian political and economic institutions based on democracy appears to assume that there is a greater potential for democracy among Palestinians than in other Arab societies. Indeed, while the Palestinians share many societal traits with other Arabs, they have been regarded as the exception to the "Arab exception," due to their higher level of education and greater exposure to western cultural influences. These things were thought to produce a more politically sophisticated society. Perhaps paradoxically, the conflict with Israel was also thought to strengthen this potential, because under Israeli rule, Palestinian civil society, as a major engine of national mobilization, experienced significant growth. For some Palestinians, the proximity of Israeli democracy also generated demands for democracy in their own future state.

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The establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) reversed these processes. The PA's institutional structure ostensibly contained all the accepted components of democracy, including an elected executive and legislative council and an independent judiciary. In practice, however, PA Chairman Yasser Arafat maintained the system of personal control he had developed in Beirut during the 1970s. This system was based on the principle of divide-and-rule: overlapping responsibilities were assigned to competing institutions, whose heads he personally appointed and who remained dependent on him and vied for his favor. It was reinforced by PA's rentier character. Since foreign aid constituted the bulk of its revenues, the PA did not depend on tax revenues from its citizens and was therefore unaccountable to them. The allocation of more than 30% of the PA budget to Arafat's presidential office provided him with another instrument for dispensing favors and maintaining control. Consequently, Arafat could ignore the legislative council and turned it into an ineffective debating society. He also neutralized the judiciary by dismissing independent judges, by ignoring verdicts not to his liking, and by establishing national security courts subject to military procedures. The print and electronic media were brought under the PA's control and used to promote Arafat's personality cult.

Palestinian society itself has undergone a process of militarization with the establishment of nine different security forces that functioned as a major employers as well as instruments to repress domestic opponents and prosecute the conflict with Israel. The strategic decision by Fatah, the dominant Palestinian movement and Arafat's personal power base, not to transform itself into a political party signified the priority given to national-revolutionary ideology over democratization. The educational curriculum, too, emphasized the importance of Palestinian national struggle over democratization.

The Palestinian middle class suffered a severe setback due to official corruption and the Mafia-like system set up by the security organs to extort

"commissions" from businessmen. The closures imposed by Israel as a measure of combating Palestinian terrorist activities also diminished employment opportunities in Israel and inflicted an additional blow on the Palestinian economy.

Most civil society institutions, except the Islamist ones, were brought under the PA's control. In addition, the PA encouraged the revival of traditional clan loyalties that it could manipulate at the expense of more modern frameworks of political organization. The growing impoverishment of Palestinians during the current 21-month confrontation drove many of them to rely on their families and clans for survival, thereby further enhancing primordial loyalties.

The cause of democratization is also undermined by the fact that the major opposition to the PA, Hamas, is also an anti-democratic movement and advocates an Islamist agenda that denies the political rights of secular forces and non-Muslims and relegates women to a marginal role in society. The PA's excessive corruption and failure to provide basic social services, particularly during the past 21 months of violence, has increased the popularity of Hamas, perhaps enabling it eventually to challenge the PA's very existence. In any case, Palestinians are left with a choice between two non-democratic options.

Any real shift towards democracy will therefore require a comprehensive overhaul of the PA system of government; a profound economic change that would enable the Palestinian middle class to function without the shackles of the security organs and would allow the growth of a free civil society; elimination of corruption as a political system; a comprehensive educational reform that would promote democratic values; and progress in the peace process with Israel. PA authoritarianism never reached the level of Iraq and Syria and more closely resembles the model of Egypt and Jordan, but it is highly unlikely that a genuine shift to democracy will take place as long as Arafat and his cohorts continue to dominate Palestinian politics.