Islam and Democracy: Can the Two Walk Together?

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An analysis of the events in the Middle East over the past two years requires a close examination of the foundations of political philosophy, using basic concepts in philosophy connected to enlightenment, freedom, and the sovereignty of man and God. In many ways, the events now taking place in the Middle East are somewhat reminiscent of what happened in Europe some two hundred years ago with the rise of the ideas of enlightenment and nationalism. To be sure, the events in the Middle East of the twenty-first century are unique to this time and place, and cannot even be imagined as eighteenth or nineteenth century events. Much has been written, for example, about the contemporary use of the internet and social networking sites to circumvent and make a mockery of the apparatuses used by the authoritarian regimes against would-be protesters. Neither these technologies nor other mass media that document events in real time were available two hundred years ago. However, a thorough understanding of the idea of the Enlightenment and of the political systems it spawned makes it possible to better examine the significance of the rise to power of the Islamic parties in many Arab countries and to better define the chances that democratic governments will arise in those countries.

The primary claim of this article is that it is not yet possible to decide whether democratic governments will spring up in Arab countries. An attempt to assess the likelihood of these developments is no simpler than was an attempt to predict the stability of the regimes of Mubarak, Assad, Qaddafi, and others. What is clear, however, is that the fundamental

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philosophical terms that underlie intelligence and cultural assessments, and as such, predictions as to how the events in the Arab world will play out, are grounded directly or indirectly in basic ideological and cultural assumptions.

Many of the analyses published thus far, especially in Israel, have been written by Middle East experts. For years, the academic discipline of Middle East studies has assumed that the societies and countries in the geographic region called the Middle East are distinct from other global geopolitical phenomena. It is clear that scholars of the Middle East are not ignoring global phenomena (such as the internet and economic globalization), but they maintain that discussion of movements and societies in the Middle East requires singular expertise. They depict a sort of unique quality of people in the region and political forms common in the Middle East. In fact, however, an understanding of the processes currently underway in the Middle East requires that these processes be fundamentally linked to phenomena that have taken place over the past few hundred years in Europe and the United States. The depiction of the Islamic current of thought that has recently scored several impressive victories in free elections in the region as rejecting "Western values" is flawed and does not provide a good description of the "West" and its "values."

The very fact that a particular government imposes restrictions on its citizens, whether they are restrictions in religious law or others, does not in and of itself preclude the establishment of democracy in the basic sense of regular elections and basic rights and equality.

The article below first briefly surveys the Enlightenment movement, whose most prominent figure was eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, and then reviews the currents of thought that subsequently opposed the Enlightenment from that time till today. Careful study reveals that a considerable number of the Islamic movements in the region draw ideologically from the Western anti-Enlightenment movement, even if their basis is Islamic religious faith. Therefore, a solid analysis of the chances that an Islamic democracy will develop is impossible without a thorough understanding of the concept of democracy, both in its Western meaning and in the new meanings it might assume in the current Middle East context. The decision whether to recognize particular characteristics as unique to the Middle East or identify them as global

characteristics of humanity is mainly an ideological decision and cannot be justified by historical or cultural research. This article prefers to look at current events in the Middle East through a Western and global prism that touches on the question of human sovereignty and freedom. While the ideas on these issues were developed in what is called the "West," as philosophical ideas, they are relevant throughout the globe – even if some people think otherwise.

What is Enlightenment?

In his 1784 essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" Kant in effect determined how enlightenment would be discussed for generations to come. Kant writes that regarding an individual, "*enlightenment is mankind's exit from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity* is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another . . . *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your *own* understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment."[1] In the social context, he states, "that a public [*publikum*] should enlighten itself is more likely; indeed, it is nearly inevitable, if only it is granted freedom . . . the *public* use of reason must at all times be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men."[2] Kant is very clear in his approach to the Church and the clergy's ability to enforce timeless conventions that are not based on human reason: "But it is absolutely forbidden to unite, even for the lifetime of a single man, in a permanent religious constitution that no one may publicly doubt, and thereby to negate a period of progress of mankind toward improvement and thus make it fruitless and even detrimental for posterity."[3] Kant thereby challenges the clergy, and later in the essay political rulers as well, whom he would restrict in their power to harm the freedom of thought and freedom of expression of their citizens and subjects. Enlightenment is thus inextricably linked with political liberalism in the sense of giving basic rights to citizens, and in particular, public freedom of expression. However, Kant does not call for political anarchism, in which every person can decide by the strength of his intellect whether he wishes to pay taxes, be drafted into the army, or obey the country's laws. Rather, Kant allows for full civil obedience, based on the rational freedom of every citizen. The public space is the place where reason dominates, while in the space where a citizen plays a particular private role (e.g., soldier, government official, or worker), he

must obey in order to preserve civil order. This is also closely connected to Kant's moral concept, but that is beyond the scope of this article.

The Enlightenment, therefore, was initially a revolutionary movement that callled for human beings to rely on their intellect in exploring natural reality as well as human moral values. The Enlightenment is also a natural successor to the Reformation of the sixteenth century, which called upon Christians to understand their holy books by themselves and to dissociate themselves from the authority of the Church and the monopoly on interpretation of holy writ that Catholic priests had assumed. Another influence is that of the scientific revolution, which led to impressive achievements in the power of the human intellect and its objective observation of nature. Essentially, enlightenment does not recognize religious, divine, ecclesiastical, or political authority, and it places man's freedom and his sovereignty over his body and his mind at the center of its political thought. To many people in Israel today, this sentence sounds almost trivial. However, we do not need to go back many years in order to be reminded that for most of human history, human beings were not sovereign entities, and they did not have freedom and basic rights. Human beings were subject to patriarchal authority, to feudalism, to the Church, and to many other systems that determined what they would think, how they would dress, what work they would do, whom they would marry, and numerous other practices that today are anchored in basic laws that grant human beings the right to decide these issues by themselves.

The idea of enlightment was revived under the Republican administration of George W. Bush. An example of the arguments made against the idea of enlightenment that was promoted by Bush early in the first decade of the twenty-first century in his war against Saddam Hussein can be found in "American Optimism and Middle Eastern Pessimism," an article published in 2004 in the IDF journal *Maarachot*. The article is litle more than a challenge to the Bush administration policy of exporting democracy. Thus, refuting statements by the Bush administration, the authors argue that "presenting precedents from a different political, social, and cultural world from that of the Middle East is largely misleading"[4] (referring to the administration spokespersons who based themselves on the political changes that had taken place in Eastern Europe and South America to support the idea that a similar political change could be made in the Middle East as well). The authors

justify the distinct approach to the Middle East populace on the basis of a culture that ostensibly separates them qualitatively from other citizens of the world.

The authors, Middle East experts, characterize Middle East society as having a "deeply entrenched belief in the dominant role of fate, which is dictated in advance in the life of the individual and the collective, and for this reason, it also adheres to the assumption that there is a deterministic historical need (which often leads to a tendency to passivity and to rejecting pursuit of change in a situation by depending on *sabr*, the well-known Middle Eastern patience). Moreover, societies in the Islamic world attribute clear importance to a preference for the collective over the idea of individualism common in the West."[5] Two claims are made here. One is about the ostensible passivity of the Arab public, which does not take action against corrupt regimes because of some faith in "the dominant role of fate." The second claim, which has no necessary or causal connection to the first, maintains that Middle East societies prefer the collective to the individual. Yet even if the collective is preferred to the individual, it is of course still possible to actively protest against a corrupt dictatorial regime, as in fact happened recently in a number of Arab states. The two claims made by the authors are not necessarily connected.

In their conclusion, the authors argue:

> There is increasing recognition that the United States and the entire West are worried about the problems in the Middle East and are prepared to deal with them more vigorously than those who live in the region itself. The lack of democracy, the extremism and terror, the weakness of civil society, the weak connection to the nation-state, poverty and ignorance, the inferior status of women – all these emerge as problems that are much more troubling to the West (and in fact, threaten its tranquility) than to most people in the Middle East. Not only do most people in the Middle East not view these problems with the same degree of seriousness as the West, but it would appear that sometimes, they do not even perceive them as problems.[6]

However, reading these lines in 2013 leaves no room for doubt: Middle East society has had its say. Most of the publics in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and other countries see the problems of poverty, corruption, the status of women, and others as fundamental problems for which they took to the streets and risked their lives. It may be that they prefer the collective

to the individual, but there is no connection whatsoever between this preference and accepting fate.

Anti-Enlightenment: A Movement as Old as the Enlightenment

To people who grow up in secular, liberal democratic countries like Israel, the description of the Enlightenment above is clear, if not obvious. Individual rights, freedom of expression, liberalism, and democracy are givens. In Hebrew, the concept of enlightenment has a fully positive connotation, and there are very few people who would proudly describe themselves as unenlightened. However, the Enlightenment movement has had many opponents over the years, from its beginning to this day. Most of its opponents were part of Western culture and developed in Western countries. One key cultural movement that reacted against the enlightenment was Romanticism, with its emphasis on subjective human perception and emotion superseding a comprehensive belief in human reason as a means to reveal the secrets of nature and arrive at universal moral norms. Many religious movements also opposed the idea of enlightenment on the basis of divine sovereignty in the world and the claim that human beings, subject to the divine, are themselves limited.

An important current of thought that opposed enlightenment and liberalism and continues to have an impact on political thought in Europe and the United States today is known as the Frankfurt School. Its proponents were a group of neo-Marxist thinkers who began their activity before the Second World War in Frankfurt; most of its members left Germany during the war, immigrating mainly to the United States. The pessimism characteristic of their approach stems from its Marxist origins and thereafter from the historical experience of the Holocaust, the industrial killing of the Jews, and the use of atomic weapons against the civilian population in Japan. The leaders of the group, which engaged in a deep social analysis of the problems of contemporary Western society, were Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno.

Horkheimer begins his essay "The Concept of Enlightenment" thus: "In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."[7] Horkheimer thus points to the main problem faced by members of the Frankfurt School: the Enlightenment that conquered the Western world and which, according to Kant, was supposed to lead it to a more just place,

led to dictatorial regimes and world wars that ended with a Holocaust in which technology, achieved by the power of the human mind, was used to kill millions of innocent civilians as part of the worst murder in human history. Enlightenment, according to Horkheimer, turned technology into a tool man uses to take over the world, and the Industrial Revolution turned science into a functional tool only that is divorced from its original aspiration to investigate the truth. The instrumentality of science and technology made it possible to alienate them from the world of morals and thereby allowed them to be exploited for purposes of mass killing. Control over nature also immediately brings with it man's alienation from reality, a basic concept in Marxist and Freudian thinking. Alienation prevents man from being happy, in contrast to the Kantian vision. Horkheimer concludes his article by stating, "But in the face of such a possibility, and in the service of the present age, enlightenment becomes wholesale deception of the masses."[8]

The Arab Spring: Is There Still Room for Optimism?

Undoubtedly the Muslim Brotherhood, like other religious movements (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) believes that man is not lord of himself and that divine authority and sacred writings are binding on man and impose limits on his way of life. Theology, in its interpretation of sacred writings, reveals hidden layers of reality, which human intelligence, science, and technology will never manage to reveal, in contrast to the Kantian ideas on the possibility of conquering happiness on the basis of human reason alone. According to the Muslim Brotherhood, the moral world and the desire to establish justice on earth require reliance on religious law and sacred writings, and they are to be preferred over human laws. In these senses, the Muslim Brotherhood is close to the Western anti-liberal movements, and the profound influence of such Western thinkers is recognizable on the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as on Shiite thought in the Islamic Revolution in Iran. (Some of the leading Shiite religious seminaries in Iran teach the writings of German philosopher Martin Heidigger, the most prominent philosopher of the critics of enlightenment in the twentieth century, and Iranian President Ahmadinejad reportedly met his ideological mentor Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi in a course he gave on Heidigger in one of the religious seminaries in Qom.[9])

That being the case, it is important to understand what we can expect of the Islamic movement and what we cannot. The Western concept of liberalism and enlightenment, to the extent that it highlights man's sovereignty and freedom, must be rejected by a movement that advocates the values of Islam and *sharia*. To be sure, founders of the Muslim Brotherhood drew much support from the rise of the fascist movement in the early twentieth century. However, over the years the movement has evolved, and contemporary leaders are grappling with different challenges. For example, the concept of democracy, in the sense of accepting the people's decision, or in the simple test of holding elections every few years, does not necessarily contradict the values of religion embraced by some Muslim Brotherhood leaders, among them Egyptian President Morsi. In this sense, and against the backdrop of the ways in which the Arab public has expressed its positions in the town square over the past two years, we can discern in the Muslim Brotherhood a profound engagement with how it will be possible to adopt democratic concepts under the basic assumptions of a religious movement. It is certainly appropriate to establish social justice according to the movement. Even before the movement came to power, this goal guided its members in their varied *dawa* activity. This is also what brought them public sympathy, particularly given the failures of the previous authoritarian governments and their profound corruption. The very fact that a particular government imposes restrictions on its citizens, whether they are restrictions in religious law or others, does not in and of itself preclude the establishment of democracy in the basic sense of regular elections and basic rights and equality. Even Kant applies restrictions on the liberty of the German citizen and requires him to obey the country's laws (though in the late eighteenth century, parliamentary democracy had not yet been established in any country in the world).

After Islamic parties came to power in some Arab countries, most Israeli commentators hastened to eulogize the potential of the Arab spring. These commentators tend to deny the chances of realizing a democratic society and government in Arab states after (and in some of the countries, before) the governmental revolutions that removed the authoritarian and dictatorial regimes. Thus, a 2012 *Maarachot* article by "Michael," author of the 2004 article cited above, repeats the basic claim that Middle East society is different from other societies in the world. Once again, the author attacks the optimists who describe the "new"

Middle East as a "region that is being led and shaped by modern young people who yearn for Western culture, are driven by the force of liberal, democratic ideas, and who operate through social networking sites."[10] The author here identifies yearning for Western culture in its liberal sense with a positive vision of the Middle East. In any case, Islamic forces that do not yearn for Western culture cannot lead to democratic ideas. However, the author gives a good description of the dilemmas the Islamic movements face in shaping a new political order and in confronting the demands of the "street" for basic rights and freedom. He correctly describes the possibility of creating "a democratic, but not liberal order"[11] in the sense that the authority of a decision by the people will be accepted, but individual freedoms that contradict Islamic law will not necessarily be allowed.

However, it is not possible to claim categorically that the Muslim Brotherhood cannot serve in the government and at the same time adopt democratic methods, and in particular, allow free elections that could also lead to its losing the elections and handing the reins of power to other political movements (for example, secular liberal ones). We cannot expect the Muslim Brotherhood to adopt a secular, liberal policy in the profound sense of the Enlightenment as described above. The Islamic movement does not believe in the sovereignty of man and in achieving justice and progress in the Kantian fashion, which encourages activity by man through the power of his intellect only. "The deep revulsion with the West," which "Michael" in his conclusion ascribes to the Islamic movements, is revulsion with the enlightened, secular liberal West. However, for hundreds of years, there have been many and varied movements in the West itself that are disgusted by the concept of enlightenment in its simple, Kantian sense. Some have become dictatorial movements that were repulsed by the ideas of Western democracy (such as the fascist movements of the early twentieth century), but over the years some have put the democratic idea into action (thus, for example, most social-democratic movements prefer the values of collective mutual responsibility to the values of undisputed individual freedom given to every citizen according to the liberal and capitalist systems).

> The Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood is contrary to the concept of enlightenment, but not necessarily democracy.

While the Iranian attempt to realize a democratic Islam appears dismal (although here too there is an ongoing debate about the connection between democracy and Islamic law), elsewhere there are also better attempts in terms of government conduct (such as Turkey). The rise of a middle class and the ability of public expression that has appeared in the public squares of Arab states over the past two years is also likely to force the Islamic movements to adopt democratic behavior in the context of domestic policy, even if this behavior is not "enlightened" and liberal in the senses defined in this article. The fall of the regime in Tunisia following the murder of the opposition leader is one example, and Morsi's retreat from attempts to advance certain reforms due to public and judicial pressure is a second example.

A similar opinion to the 2012 article by "Michael" appears in an article by Professor Asher Susser, who also points to the fact that "Middle East societies are for the most part not secular. These are societies in which the public ascribes great importance to belief, religious ritual, and religion."[12] He rejects an effort to extrapolate from the attempt at a Spring of Nations in nineteenth century Europe to the contemporary Arab Spring, and he is careful to maintain the cultural distinction between West and East. Susser points to an ostensible gap "between outsiders' expectations... establishment of liberal/secular governments on the ruins of the old regimes – and the Islamist reality that ultimately emerged."[13] Susser laments post-modernist currents in the West, which have sought to challenge "the underpinnings of rational thought of the modern enlightenment."[14] Thus, already from the outset of his article Susser by choice becomes a representative of the enlightened position, which favors the rule of human intellect over any other source of knowledge (divine or collective, for example).

Susser confuses the question of democracy in Arab countries with whether the new regimes are liberal and enlightened. He makes an implicit assumption, identical to that of "Michael," that once the Islamic movements do not accept the "burden" of liberal enlightenment, they cannot support the establishment of democracies on the ruins of the authoritarian regimes. He describes a debate that developed on the Arab Spring between those "who maintained that the Middle East was on the verge of an Islamic tidal wave" and those who "argued that a new Middle Eastern democracy was taking shape here and now."[15] Thus, Susser assumes, though without defending this assumption, that the Islamic

tidal wave is fundamentally opposed to democracy. This is in contrast to the correct distinction, which is that the Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood is contrary to the concept of enlightenment, but not necessarily democracy. Susser laments the death of the process of secularization in the Middle East, without which, he assumes, Middle Eastern democracy will be impossible, though again, he does not prove it. For Susser too, the "West" is only the liberal, secular West, and he does not consider all the movements that opposed Kantian enlightenment for profound reasons to be "Western."

Although Susser mentions the currents of thought that oppose enlightenment in the West, he seems unable to break free of an identification of democracy with an enlightened, secular government on the model of the French Revolution. Susser, who is careful to emphasize the uniqueness of the Middle East, does not succeed in seriously considering the possibility of democratic development that is based on religious principles and that does not advocate the sovereignty of the individual. How would such a democracy look? One possibility is an Islamic democracy that draws from *sharia* and restricts some of the individual rights accepted in liberal democracies (e.g., on matters of modesty or separation of the sexes), but still allows free elections and maintains the separation of powers, freedom of expression, and minority rights. It is precisely such a connection between the desire of the masses for freedom and democracy and traditional societies based on the foundations of Islam that is likely to bear fruit, both in a slow reform of Islam (not toward secularism, but toward greater tolerance for minorities and freedom of expression, for example), and in creating a democracy that is more suited to people and cultures in the Middle East.

It appears that a correct look at the roots of democracy and the Enlightenment and a close examination of the various kinds of Western political philosophy would allow commentators to raise richer possibilities about possible future developments in a Middle East that is taking shape. More than ever, the current period requires that we exercise caution in assessing the fate of the historic revolutions shaking up the Middle East. Political Islam does not necessarily mean the loss of a chance for democracies in the region. Thus the point of this article was not to determine how the future of the Middle East will look, rather to caution commentators against judging too quickly and sealing the fate

of the region without examining new possibilities such as the creation of Islamic democracies in a range of colors.

Notes

1 All quotations of Kant are from "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" in *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 58.
2 Ibid., p. 59.
3 Ibid., p. 61.
4 Major Michael and Major Alon, "American Optimism and Middle Eastern Pessimism," *Maarachot* 393 (2004): 3-11; quoted sentence is from page 5.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid, p. 11.
7 All quotations of Horkheimer are from "The Concept of Enlightenment" in Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London and New York: Verso, 1997); quoted sentence is from p. 3.
8 Ibid., p. 42.
9 Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott Clark,. "War Games," *The Gaurdian*, December 8, 2007, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/dec/08/iran.cathyscottclark.
10 Colonel Michael, "The Rise of the 'Green Wave': The Strengthening of the Islamic Current in the Shadow of the Regional Upheavals, and Implications for Israel," *Maarachot* (2012): 12-17; quoted sentence is from p. 13.
11 Ibid., p. 15.
12 Asher Susser, "Tradition and Modernity in the 'Arab Spring,'" *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 1 (2012): 29-41; quoted sentence is from p. 30.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p. 31.
15 Ibid., p. 34.