

Two Myths about the Middle East the World Should Do Without

By Nada Tarbush

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One collateral "damage" of recent events in the Middle East may be the crumbling of two widely-held myths: one speaks of the "Arab exception" and seeks to explain it through culturalist notions asserting that Arab and more broadly Muslim societies are inherently anti-democratic; the second claims that Israel is "the only democracy in the Middle East."

The popular uprisings originating in Sidi Bouzid last December and still spreading to other parts of the Arab world have surely knocked down the first myth.

The myth persisted throughout the years despite the fact that Arab outcries for freedom existed well before the popular revolt erupted in Tunisia. Indeed, for generations, many Arabs have paid with their lives in defense of freedom. Still today, Arab jails are teeming with political prisoners whose only crime was to oppose the repressive regimes that ruled over them for so long.

But these outcries were often hushed up, sometimes for pragmatic reasons by countries that continued business as usual with those regimes, or dismissed as outliers by some intellectuals whose fanciful theories reduced the culturally rich and heterogeneous Arab societies to a simplistic black or white. Proponents of such models spoke shamelessly of a "clash of civilizations," of the "Arab mind," of the "Arab exception." These notions sometimes made their way into the prose and speech of journalists and politicians, who, not so infrequently, juxtaposed them with yet another dubious generalization: Israel as a beacon of democracy in a sea of darkness.

The painful truth is that there are no true democracies in the Middle East and North Africa, period.

No doubt, Israel is a democracy for its Jewish population, but the fact remains that some 20 percent of its citizens are not Jews. They are those Palestinians who managed to avoid expulsion after the creation of Israel in 1948, and their descendants. In Israeli government parlance, they are referred to as "Israeli Arabs."

By Western standards, protecting such a minority would be a fundamental tenet of a liberal democracy.

In Israel, however, there has been a chronic failure to protect the rights of the Arab minority. Worse, this failure did not emanate from some kind of bureaucratic oversight but rather from premeditated government policies, particularly on matters of land ownership, as Ben White has amply documented in "Israeli Apartheid." Over the years, Israel's Arab minority saw the bulk of its land confiscated by the State. This expropriation was made possible thanks to the promulgation of arbitrary laws and regulations rich in Orwellian newspeak such as classifying some of these Arabs as "Present Absentees" in order to justify taking away their properties. According to White, about one in four Arab citizens of Israel is considered a "Present Absentee."

Since the 1970s, Israeli politics has been significantly influenced by hard-line settlers and parties openly hostile to the indigenous Palestinian minority.

While masses of Arabs have now initiated significant movements toward democracy, some leading Israeli politicians are steering Israel in the opposite direction, as recently manifested by the bringing of a series of anti-democratic bills before the Knesset, for instance the Boycott and Anti-Incitement bills which, if passed, would greatly constrain Israelis' freedom of choice and expression.

Just beyond the Green Line, Israel's behavior in the occupied Palestinian territories is hardly consistent with democratic values. For nearly 44 years Israel's conduct there has been notorious for its scornful disregard of human rights and international law with killings of civilians, arbitrary detention, torture, siege, confiscation of land, home demolitions, construction of settlements, a wall, bypass roads excluding Palestinians of the West Bank, random closures and road-blocks.

No, Israel is no island of democracy. And no, the Palestinians, as all Arabs, are no bearers of anti-democratic genes. Like their Arab brethren everywhere, they yearn for a dignified life free of oppression. The struggle for freedom of the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank is too well known to require elaboration. The 1987 Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation coined the term intifada. Yet, Palestinians are still waiting for long-overdue justice.

By failing to grant the Palestinians their rights, Israel is swimming against an overwhelming wave of change. Not only are we at the threshold of a new dawn in the Middle East, where people stand up against injustice with hitherto unprecedented determination, but there is also a sea change in people's awareness everywhere, notably in Europe and the United States. One has to look no further than supportive online comments and YouTube to see that.

In this new age, if not out of a sense of morality, then at least out of sheer expediency, Israel should liberate itself from all sorts of dogma, give equal rights to all its citizens, and at last free its neighbors in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

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