INTRODUCTION

In recent years attention has focused on moves towards democratization in various regions of the world. The shift away from single-party, authoritarian state structures and the tentative steps towards multi-party politics and pluralistic forms of government have been carefully monitored. Yet there has been little discussion of democratization in the Middle East. In the study by Diamond et al. of 26 countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia, the states of the Middle East, Islamic and otherwise, were omitted, on the grounds that ‘they generally lack much previous democratic experience, and most appear to have little prospect of a transition even to semi-democracy’. Similarly, though from a different perspective, Giacomo Luciani, writing in the late 1980s of the notion of a ‘rentier state’, also implied that democratization in the Middle East was unviable. The rentier-state analysis rests on the hypothesis that external sources of income resulting from the export of oil (in other words, oil revenue), is in fact a form of rent. The state, in such a system, does not raise income through the more traditional route of domestic taxation and economic strategy (which are often seen to be associated with popular demands for political reform and legitimacy), but externally through the sale of oil. This situation leads to a paradox: while a number of Middle Eastern states are wealthy in terms of Gross National Product, which might present a prima facie case for political development, this wealth is not the result of industrialization and societal differentiation – factors once seen as necessary for political change – but simply the result of enormous oil revenues. In non-rentier states, governments have an interest in economic development and good governance in order to increase the chances of being able to raise revenue. Without such an interest, it is inevitable that ‘rentier states will display little tendency to evolve towards democratic institutions’.
In a sense, then, there has tended to exist a feeling that the Middle East is something of a ‘lost cause’, a view which largely rests on the assumption that ‘tremendous barriers’ exist to the establishment of ‘fully-functioning democratic political systems’ in the region.  

Divided ethnically, lacking strong political institutions, tethered to authoritarian structures of government, lacking in unity, political legitimacy and tolerance for opposition, exploited by the external factor of the Cold War and, recently, in thrall to fundamentalist religion, the countries of the Middle East have been regarded as possessing characteristics inimical to any form of democratization.

In this chapter, that view is disputed, and attention is drawn to a number of points. First, the situation in the Middle East is changing, particularly after the 1991 Gulf War, and the implication of these changes for democracy should be discussed. Second, in this discussion the notion of democracy should not solely be confined to Western-style liberal democracy. Third (the previous point notwithstanding), some new developments within a number of Middle Eastern states – for example, in terms of the reintroduction of elections, the removal of bans on political parties and more generally in the sphere of participation – may be viewed as steps paving the way for a fuller democratization in a liberal democratic sense. Certainly, there has been considerable discussion of democracy in the Middle East recently, coming from previously perhaps unlikely quarters. President Assad of Syria announced at a ceremony in March 1992 marking his new seven-year term of office: ‘Democracy does not mean political chaos. It means making available the best circumstances that enable the citizen to make a free choice.’

A few months earlier, King Hussein of Jordan declared in favour of democratization and political pluralism, with due care and attention to be paid to freedom of expression and human rights. The Lebanese Prime Minister proclaimed the government’s commitment to ‘parliamentary and municipal elections, held within a framework of freedom’, and the Iraqi oppositionist group, the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI) has reiterated its respect for ‘freedom of opinion, the multi-party system and free elections’. These developments in the political arena have begun to attract academic attention, for instance in the work of Hudson, Piscatori and Owen.

A necessary caveat in any inquiry into the phenomenon, is that the region must not be seen as politically homogeneous. Important differences exist between the various states, such that a move towards democratization in one country may be symbolized by the removal of the ban on the formation of political parties, while in another, it might