Introduction

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In the introduction to his volume *Liberal Thought in the Eastern Mediterranean* (2008), the late historian Christoph Schumann stated presciently: “Looking at the political realities in the Eastern Mediterranean today, the project of publishing a volume on liberal thought seems to be daring, to say the least.”¹ The political realities that Schumann referred to then were American military rule in Iraq, Islamist inroads in Egypt in 2005 and Palestine in 2006, and the war between Israel and Hizballah in Lebanon in 2006. These events, in his estimation, turned hopes for political liberalization and democratization in the Near East into “a grand delusion.”

However, the popular uprisings in the Arab world in 2011 (the Arab Spring), led to the collapse of the entrenched research paradigm regarding the endurance of authoritarian regimes. They also pointed to the political maturity of the masses, especially of young people, to the potential of Arab civil society, and to the Middle East as an integral part of the global village, widely exposed to technology, electronic communication, and Western ideas. Significantly, two key notions in contemporary Arab public discourse are freedom and democracy.²

These trends refuted the image of Arab exceptionalism, the view of the Arab region as caught in an impasse and under the strong grip of authoritarian regimes that prevent it from initiating significant processes of change such as occurred, for example, in Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The Arab Spring reinforced efforts aimed at liberal democracy, although it also witnessed renewed efforts at authoritarianism. Evidently, bringing down dictatorial leaders in Tunis, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen alone would not suffice to mold a culture of democracy and liberal-democratic institutions. However, a historic watershed had been reached, removing the barrier of fear, restoring the people (*sha’b*) to center stage, and paving the way for the struggle over the image of the polity.

The contemporary demand for freedom and democracy in the Arab world is not entirely new, but rather it accrued gradually, permeating public awareness over time, and intensified by globalization and dissident agents of...
change, including in liberal circles. In light of the 2011 uprisings, a discussion of liberal thought in the Middle East, therefore, is no longer a daring undertaking, but rather an obligatory one.

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Over the last 40 years, liberalism and liberal thinking seemed to be anathema to the Arab world. Some scholars, such as Nadav Safran (1962), P. J. Vatikiotis (1969), Bernard Lewis (1986, 2002), and, to a certain extent, Fouad Ajami (1998), fostered a “crisis” paradigm, namely, a sharp decline in the liberal-parliamentary experiment during the 1930s and the rise of totalitarian ideologies, embodied, for example, by pro-Fascist voices and Islamist reactionism.\(^3\) What went wrong? as the title of one of Lewis’s later books suggests, was, essentially, the failure of Arab and Muslim society in facing the challenges of modernity. Lewis wrote:

> In the course of the twentieth century it became abundantly clear in the Middle East and indeed all over the lands of Islam that things had indeed gone badly wrong. Compared with its millennial rival, Christendom, the world of Islam had become poor, weak and ignorant. . . . Modernizers—by reform or revolution—concentrated their efforts in three main areas: military, economic, and political. The results achieved were, to say the least, disappointing. . . . Worst of all is the political result: The long quest for freedom has left a string of shabby tyrannies, ranging from traditional autocracies to new-style dictatorship, modern only in their apparatus of repression and indoctrination.\(^4\)

Other scholars, such as Elie Kedourie (1994) and Samuel Huntington (1996), questioned the compatibility of Islam and Western values altogether. Kedourie argued that there is nothing in the political traditions of the Arab world that might make the organizing ideas of representation, elections, and constitution familiar. Rather, Arab politics adhered to another European style of government, enlightened absolutism, which resembled the traditional Oriental despotism and in which the state was stronger than society.\(^5\) Huntington, for his part, defined Islam as a religion of the sword going back to the period of the prophet Muhammad, demonstrated historically by intense rivalry and bloody borders between Muslims and non-Muslims.\(^6\)

Viewed from a less dichotomist or politicized perspective, however, liberal-democratic values were in fact hotly debated in the Arab world during the early decades of the twentieth century. Constitutions, elections, and civil rights became important in the Arab political lexicon during that period and provided support for protest and defiance when such rights were violated or threatened. Liberal values were a vital part of an emerging public sphere, typified by proliferating opinions and organizations, most of them operating in a political