

TRIBALISM

IN THE ARAB MENA REGION

Arab tribalism is a drag on development and reform writes **Leanne Piggott**

In December 2004 representatives from Arab states and the G-8 group of wealthy nations met in Morocco to discuss economic and political reform in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Attending the so-called 'Forum on the Future' were 30 delegates of civil society organisations (CSOs) from 13 Arab states. In their public statement criticising the slow process of reform in the Arab world, the CSO representatives declared that the 'main obstacle hindering reform is the lack of willingness on the part of most Arab governments'. They stated further that 'Palestinian and Iraqi issues should not be used as excuses'. Moreover, Western governments should 'relate their political and economic cooperation to the progress of reforms'.

To varying degrees, processes of political and economic change are currently under way in Iraq, the Palestinian territories (since the death of Yasser Arafat), Jordan, Morocco and a small number of Gulf States. But a real sea-change in the political and economic culture of the region has yet to occur. A

mere absence of the requisite political will does not of itself explain why more broad-based economic and political reforms are proving so elusive in the Arab MENA countries. As will be argued below, long established socio-cultural factors within Arab society, in particular, traditional tribal identity and loyalty, have been greatly underestimated as an impediment to structural (economic, political, institutional) reform and the development of a credible rule of law system.

Deficits in economic and human development

Although many of the Arab MENA countries are endowed with vast oil reserves, the Arab world, as noted in the United Nations' first *Arab Human*

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Development Report (AHDR 2002), is resource rich but development poor. On key indices of economic and human development, the Arab states have performed worse than any other region in the world, with the sole exception of sub-Saharan Africa.

One out of five people in the Arab MENA countries lives on less than US\$2 per day. Between 1975 and 1999, GDP per capita in the Arab states grew by a total of only 4% compared to 31% in East Asia and the Pacific, 23% in South Asia, 19% in the OECD countries and 8% in Latin America and the Caribbean. Only sub-Saharan Africa recorded a worse performance, suffering a decline of GDP per capita of 10% over the same period. Anaemic rates of export growth, declining trade volumes, weak private-sector contribution to economic development and poor prospects for foreign direct investment paint a discouraging picture. The 2004 *Economic Freedom of the World Report*, published by the Fraser Institute, highlights the deficits in economic liberties in the Arab MENA states that underpin these statistics.

The Arab states also perform poorly on certain non-economic indicators of human development. The overall number of illiterate people in the MENA region is actually increasing, whereas in other parts of the developing world it is decreasing. Of those who are illiterate among Arab adults (more than 65 million), two-thirds of them are women. This means that one in two Arab adult women can neither read nor write. At the time of publication of the 2002 *Arab Human Development Report*, 'ten million children between 6 and 15 years of age [were] currently out of school' and 'if current trends persist, this number will increase by 40 percent by 2015'. The declining quality of education in the Arab world and the 'major mismatch' between what is taught in Arab schools and universities and the rapid change in educational needs brought about by globalisation and accelerated technology further limit the prospects for future economic development.

On the other hand, in life expectancy and health care, the Arab states have made impressive progress. Since the early 1970s, the life expectancy of an Arab child at birth has improved by 14 years and the infant mortality rate has declined by 85 per thousand live births. This has resulted in one of

the highest rates of population growth in the world and also in what strategist Anthony Cordesman has referred to as a 'youth explosion'. In 2000, 38% of Arabs were aged 14 years or less, a significantly higher percentage than the global average. Four years later, fertility rates across the Arab world are, on average, still high by international standards.¹ In most Arab states today, well over 50% of the population is under the age of 25.

High rates of population growth and poor economic performance are an explosive mix in the Arab MENA states. Although some states have performed better than others, the 2004 World Bank's *Global Economic Prospects* report argued that the key challenge for the region is to reduce, through higher GDP growth, the current unemployment rate of 15% of the labour force, which is among the highest in the developing world.

In order to absorb those currently unemployed and provide jobs for new labour-market entrants, GDP in the Arab economies would have to grow at an annual rate that is variously estimated to be between 5% and 7%. However, the current average annual rate of growth in GDP in the MENA countries is 3.5%-4% and as low as 1.5% in some states. The World Bank's forecast average growth rate in GDP in MENA countries between 2006 and 2015 is 4.3%. Accordingly, the high rates of population growth and, in particular, the expansion in the proportion of the population under 14 years of age, coupled with the projected rates of growth in GDP, mean that the unemployment rate can only rise in the foreseeable future. Indeed, the number of unemployed in Arab countries is projected to rise to 25 million by 2010 if present rates continue.

The political prognosis

The AHDR 2002 identifies three critical, mutually-reinforcing deficits that face all Arab MENA states: freedom, women's empowerment, and human capabilities and knowledge in relation to income. These are attributed to Arab governments' 'lack of accountability, transparency and integrity' and, according to the 2004 World Bank report, concomitantly poor fiscal management, bureaucratic delays and inefficiency, sub-standard infrastructure services and corruption. The subjection of scientific institutions to political strategies and power conflicts, and other political obstacles to knowledge

acquisition, are identified as even more severe in Arab countries than those posed by their socio-economic structures. According to the Freedom House criteria, not a single Arab state is rated as 'free'. As of December 2004, not one Arab state had, in even a rudimentary sense, a representative and accountable government functioning efficiently and transparently.²

Since 2001, UN agencies, CSOs and even the League of Arab states have all called for wide-ranging reforms. In March 2004 the new Egyptian library *Bibliotheca Alexandrina*, with five major Arab CSOs, issued the 'Alexandria Statement' calling for the introduction of democratic political institutions, regular and free elections, an independent judiciary, freedom of expression and communication and implementation of internationally-recognised human rights norms in Arab society.

Some Arab states appear to have begun a slow process of political and economic reform, if only as a means of preserving, if not legitimising, the status quo. The 'Tunis Declaration of the League of Arab States', published at the end of the Arab League summit meeting in May 2004, called for democratic reforms but was widely dismissed as empty posturing. In a vote among Arab business, political and community leaders at a World Economic Forum session on Arab reform held in Amman, Jordan, shortly after the Arab League summit, '94.4% agreed that the expressed commitment to reform among Middle East governments is "merely rhetorical" while only 5.6% agreed that it is for real'.

So despite the voluminous reports and near-unanimous calls for basic reform, little has changed. Why? A socio-cultural analysis provides evidence that the problem for reform in the Arab world cuts much deeper than simply an absence of will among the ruling elite.

Something has been missing from the analysis

As Roy Mottahedeh argued in the preface to *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, the 'persistence of older forms of social identification in new settings is as much a feature of contemporary Middle Eastern history as it is of contemporary European history'. However, the various international, regional and CSO reports

published in the past few years, whilst drawing attention to a wide range of economic and political constraints in Arab society, have rarely mentioned the deeply-rooted socio-cultural foundations on which they rest.

Two exceptions have been brief references in the 'Alexandria Statement' and the 2003 UN *Arab Development Report* to the important role that tribalism has played and continues to play in Arab politics and society. The former acknowledges the need for 'a review of some of the values that continue to negatively affect the Arab life such as submissiveness and obedience, and substituting them with values of independence, dialogue and positive interaction'. The 2003 *Arab Human Development Report* (AHDP 2003) notes, in passing, that 'traditional Arab social structures, whether represented in patriarchal societies or in tribes and clans' are no less harmful to 'modern human values' and thus to Arab efforts at development, than the restrictions placed

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upon social and political freedoms by the corrupt autocracies that rule the region. According to the authors of this report, the 'values of citizenship, law and normal human rights—in addition to religious rights—all gave way to the mentality of the tribe'. The impediment to Arab development constituted by tribalism is overlooked altogether in the AHDR 2002 and in the various reports of the World Bank and the IMF.

If the intention of these documents was to generate debate, there is little in their conclusions that the peoples of the region did not already know. What these reports lack, in general, is a deeper analysis of what sustains autocratic rule at a cultural level, and a plan of action to counteract popular attitudes that underpin the absence of political freedoms, cultural stagnation, poor education, the failure to empower women, and a media that panders to popular prejudice instead of challenging

it. Further, whilst religious divisions have been a major focus of much of the literature on reform in the Arab Muslim world in recent years, the failure to acknowledge the role of patriarchal tribal values and structures in Arab society is a major flaw in all of the reports and declarations thus far published.

Traditional Arab social structure: 'Agnation' or 'tribal patriarchy'

Historical and literary records show that since pre-Islamic times, the basic definition of identity in the Middle East, the dividing line between self and other, has not been social or economic, but that which is acquired at birth. It is 'blood', or common descent, that determines the primary level of one's identity. In ascending order, these are family, clan and tribe. In the Arab world, the tribal structure is known as 'agnation', that is, a system based on

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'agnates', namely, men connected to other men through a common male ancestor.

The fundamental role of male lineage and tribal divisions in Arab society today derives from the region's traditional desert milieu in which economic life had revolved around the raising of livestock and the consequent need to control large areas of territory. Within this traditional society, the larger the number of combatant men available in a nomadic group, the larger the territory it would be able to protect from competing groups, and therefore the larger its livestock herd would be and the greater its power.

In traditional agnatic societies, the tribal group constantly sought to expand the number of males tied to the group by patriarchal lineage and, through strict control of their women, to decrease the opportunities of rival groups to expand their male offspring. From this pre-modern structure, deep-seated notions of kinship, shame, honour and revenge were developed which helped to form

cohesive and protective societies in tribal settings. Solidarity, 'group feeling', or what the 14th century Arab sociologist-historian Ibn Khaldoun referred to as *asabiyyah*, is the critical factor in Arab Muslim history that has determined the rise and decline of ruling elites. In contemporary times, these same features pose a crippling barrier against the transition to economic, civic and political modernity.

Whilst the region has recently witnessed the emergence of a number of civil society organisations, a phenomenon considered by many theorists to be a prerequisite for liberal economic and political reform, the process remains slow and the possibility of establishing political movements or parties in opposition to the ruling elites remains elusive. There is a simple explanation for this, namely, that in many Arab states, political parties are illegal and action against the government is, more often than not, life-threatening and ultimately fatal.

However, there is a deeper socio-cultural dynamic which facilitates the inability to realise civil and political change and contributes to the ability of governing elites to maintain the status quo. As historian Bernard Lewis has pointed out in *The Political Language of Islam*, there is no equivalent in traditional Arab discourse for the classical Greek (and now modern) concept of 'the citizen' having broad allegiance to State and society. The individual in the Arab world does not, generally speaking, see herself or himself as an autonomous being with 'rights'. It is to the patriarchal tribe that the individual feels most closely attached.

In Arab society, therefore, one's life is not one's own. One 'belongs' to a hierarchy of institutions—family, patriarchal agnatic or tribal group, religious group and, lastly, 'nation'. According to the AHDP 2003, the inculcation at an early age of patriarchal values is associated with an authoritarian and overprotective style of child rearing within the Arab family that 'adversely affects children's independence, self-confidence and social efficiency, and leads to an increase in passive attitudes and the deterioration of decision-making skills, not only with respect to behaviour, but also with respect to how the child thinks'.

The imposition of an extensive hierarchy of loyalties on each Arab from birth has many consequences that are antithetical to the spirit of

modernity. It constricts personal freedoms and lays the foundations for the absence of political rights and civil liberties across the Arab MENA region. It makes social mobility nearly impossible and precludes the development of rights-based culture needed to underpin democratic reform.

One of the most deleterious effects of the perseverance of traditional tribal values in Arab society today occurs in the political arena. Political leaders and civil servants still act according to what they perceive to be required by their respective hierarchies of loyalty and have little, if any, concept of the overall public interest. In this culture, personal relations and favouritism outweigh merit and efficiency in both the public and private spheres. As the AHDR 2003 notes, 'this suffocating social climate stifles creativity, innovation and the acquisition of knowledge'. These 'value-related issues in Arab society form a vicious circle that stands in the way of cognitive development, open-mindedness and a positive approach to life and knowledge'.

Even Islam, with its emphasis on the concept of *umma* (world community of Muslims) has never succeeded in overcoming tribal boundaries anywhere for any length of time. In his article, 'Tribe vs. Islam: The Post-colonial Arab State and the Democratic Imperative', Mamoun Fandy puts it thus: 'When Islam and the tribe face off in Arab politics, it is almost inevitably the tribe that wins'. Tribal loyalties have also predominated over the various Arab secular nationalist movements such as Pan-Arabism, Nasserism, and the Iraqi and Syrian versions of Ba'athism. Despite many inducements and confrontations, tribes remain an essential component of the political system in the Arab world and one that continues to constitute an obstacle to political unification. This has led sociologist Halim Barakat to conclude that tribalism today continues 'as a force opposed to the concept of the *umma* in both its Islamic and secular nationalist versions'.

Guidelines for policy

The present realities of the region suggest that an independent, internally generated evolution towards democratic reform in the Arab world would founder and stagnate as a direct result of two competing forces: the ruling elites who are concerned about the implications of liberalisation and traditional

loyalties that would assert themselves once under threat from alternative sources of identity.

So what are the prospects for transition? One school of thought claims that a relationship exists between open markets and political freedom, and that economic liberties must normally precede the acceptance of higher levels of civic and political freedom. Those who subscribe to this view would see the steady expansion of the global economy as the best prospect for infusing the Arab world with the logic of economic development that will ultimately break down traditional socio-cultural, and in turn, political structures.

However, the ruling elites, who presently sit at the pinnacle of the tribal hierarchy in their countries, are well aware that economic development has the potential to destroy their monopolistic control over political power by creating centres of wealth in the private sector, away from state control, and a strong middle class committed to legitimate social institutions to which all citizens can feel genuine allegiance.

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The elites are thus in a dilemma. They need economic development to maintain their relative strength against rival elites both within and beyond their own countries. To date they have responded to this challenge by constricting the level of economic development in their countries to the bare minimum that is containable within the framework of their political control. As a consequence, and as discussed above, the Arab world continues to fall even further behind almost every other region of the world in key economic and other human development indicators such as education, human rights and the rule of law.

This enforced backwardness in economic and human development, on the one hand, and the perpetuation and apparent intractability of the tribally based hierarchy of loyalties in the Arab world, on the other, are thus mutually reinforcing. While this state of affairs continues, Arabs will at

best have only a weak sense of allegiance to the states of which they are citizens; public officials will continue to be corrupted by particularist loyalties; the development of a rule of law culture will continue to be undermined; and the concept of a state that embodies and promotes the common will and the common good will be a distant dream.

Are there any brighter prospects on the horizon? According to Anthony Cordesman, the growing disjunction between employment and educational opportunities for Arab youth and the vast economic potential in the region, combined with improved communications and growing awareness of the disjunction, could, in time, produce a massive repudiation by Arab youth of the hierarchy of loyalties that constricts their lives and their future. 'Tribal tradition', says Cordesman, is 'a luxury the Arab world already cannot afford'.

But how do such changes come about? Whilst it is oxymoronic to suggest that democracy anywhere can be externally imposed, it does not follow that external events cannot help to precipitate and foster the evolution of democracy from within. Hence the Arab CSOs' recommendation at the December 2004 'Forum on the Future', that western governments should 'relate their political and economic cooperation to the progress of reforms'.


However, it is not sufficient that offers of trade, investment and aid be tied to purely economic

liberalisation. Allowing private centres of economic activity and wealth to develop outside government control is certainly vital to generate reform. But it is also perilous to propagate models for reform which ignore the indigenous, pre-modern roots of the many inhibitors to economic and human development in the Arab world, tribalism in particular.

Economic liberalisation must be accompanied by the freedom to develop broad-based cultural, trade union, sporting and social organisations operating independently of the State. From these beginnings a coherent democratic political opposition may develop. Unless there is pressure for broader forms of liberalisation, anti-modern traditions will continue to be a drag on development and reform, and the MENA region cannot hope to shake itself free of their effects and make the progress to which it aspires. Any proposals for reform that fail to come to grips with the tribal straightjacket will continue to be, as former Libyan Prime Minister Abd Al-Hamid Al-Bakkoush has observed, like 'an attempt to cross the river before we have built the bridges'.

Endnotes

- ¹ Four notable exceptions are Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon and Tunisia.
- ² This article was completed before the January 2005 election in Iraq.



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