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The fundamentals of democracy

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Reflecting on the problems of democracy in the Middle East, the American ambassador to the UN during the Reagan administration, Jeane Kirkpatrick, said: "The Arab world is the only part of the world where I've been shaken in my conviction that if you let the people decide, they will make fundamentally rational decisions." This thought must have crossed the minds of her conservative friends in the White House as they observed with shock (and awe) the outpouring of Shia consciousness in southern Iraq, complete with turbaned clerics, anti-American slogans and calls for an Islamic state.

With images of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution playing in the background, this development left the Bush administration scrambling for answers. The post-Saddam era was not supposed to unfold in this way. The overwhelming pre-war consensus predicted scenes of jubilation and the warm embrace of American soldiers (and American values) reminiscent of the liberation of France in 1944. The two principal U.S. Middle East advisers predicted that the "scenes of rejoicing in their cities would exceed those that followed the liberation of Kabul" (Bernard Lewis) and "precious few among them dream of a Shia state. The majority are secularists" (Fouad Ajami).

The critical questions now are: Is Islam compatible with democracy and, if so, is it compatible with U.S. national interests in the Middle East? These questions lie at the heart of New York University law professor and Islam scholar Noah Feldman's *After Jihad: America and the Struggle for Islamic Democracy*.

Feldman's Orthodox Jewish upbringing, combined with a doctorate in Islamic thought from Oxford, allows him to navigate thorny issues of religion and politics with sensitivity and insight.

The book is divided into three sections. In the first part, Feldman explores the compatibility between Islam and democracy on the level of ideas. Rejecting both an extreme eurocentric and a bin Laden interpretation of Islam that emphasizes its "unchanging nature," Feldman convincingly argues that both Islam and democracy are "mobile ideas" with sufficient elasticity to develop a synthesis to meet the demands of the modern age and promote political development. "The question is not whether that 'democratic' structure is 'really there' in early Muslim history or classical Islamic political theory; that is an interpretive question for Muslims to address. What matters is that the potential democratic readings of Islamic tradition are possible, and that Muslims today are reading their tradition that way."

Here, Feldman echoes the thoughts of Graham Fuller in his recent book, *The Future of Political Islam*, which argued that the question of Islam's compatibility with democracy is fundamentally misleading. A more valuable question is not "what Islam is" but rather

"what do Muslims want?" If Muslims are genuinely interested in reconciling their religious tradition with the requirements of liberal democracy, then they will have to invoke arguments that are both culturally authentic and politically progressive, respond to the inevitable conservative challenges and re-interpret their tradition.

In two important chapters on Islamic equality and Islamic liberty, which democracy and human-rights activists in the Muslim world would benefit from reading, Feldman explores how this might be done in an Islamic democracy. "There are no guarantees or laws of history that make a synthesis an inevitable result of the contact between Islam and democracy," he cautions, "but there are also no rules rendering it impossible. The outcome will depend on contingent facts: real people making decisions about ideas in the context of existing policies and institutions."

The book's middle section is a crash course in the problems of democracy in the Muslim world. In a broad overview of the prospects and problems of democratization in various Muslim countries, Feldman's discussion is both accessible and nuanced.

He finds room for cautious optimism in Khatami's Iran, Sukarnoputri's Indonesia and, especially (and controversially), in the modernizing monarchies of Jordan and Morocco.

Feldman's optimism about Jordan is both excessive and unwarranted. Despite a brief opening in the early 1990s, Jordan has experienced a steady process of de-democratization and deliberal-

ization for much of the past decade. Recent scholarly treatment of this topic (in the *Journal of Democracy*) confirms the view that, rather than a genuine attempt to advance political development, attempts at democratization have really been about regime survival in the face of a hostile population. King Abdullah himself was rather candid on this point. In an interview with the *New York Times* on ascending the throne, Abdullah revealed his own authoritarian bias when he confidently affirmed that just "[b]ecause we have a democracy, it doesn't mean that people can take things into their own hands."

The book's final section seeks to influence the policy debate in the United States. Feldman makes a singularly important contribution to post-9/11 policy on the Muslim world by making the case for the necessity of Islamic democracy.

In a tightly argued and pragmatic assessment of the costs and benefits of promoting democratization, Feldman identifies the key tension: "The question is whether to entertain the risk of disaster in the form of a revolution" if the status quo of supporting Muslim autocrats is maintained "or to take the less costly risk of destabilization that definitely accompanies a process of democratization." While acknowledging the risks, he persuasively argues that "it would be better to have gradual democratization, with all its hiccups and uncertainties, rather than take a chance on revolution with its consequences of anti-Americanism and general regional trauma."

He anticipates the possible objections: fear of an Islamist takeover; oil; and danger to Israel. On the latter, he argues that "Israel's hopes for real membership in the Middle East Eastern community depend on Arab citizens accepting the normalization of relations. Only in a democratic environment is this outcome possible."

Noah Feldman has written a courageous and long overdue volume on the necessity of Islamic democracy. There is much here that Canadian policy-makers can learn from. Sadly, for far too long, Canadian governments have supported a de facto alliance with Muslim autocrats and despots. In a passage that summarizes his thesis, Feldman advises that "[l]ong-term Western policy toward the Muslim world is in need of serious reconsideration; and the politics of the Muslim world cry out for self-transformation into new patterns, faithful both to democratic values and to the traditions of Islam understood by Muslims themselves." Let us hope that Washington gives his case a fair hearing. The stability of our planet in the coming decades will depend on it.

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