The essence of an Arab renaissance in this critical era of the history of the Arab nations is a historic shift towards a society of freedom and good governance. Freedom is taken here in the comprehensive sense of the eradication of all forms of curtailment of human dignity. This comprehensive sense not only incorporates civil and political freedoms (in other words, liberation from oppression) but also the imperative that the individual be liberated from all means by which human dignity may be curtailed, such as, hunger, disease, ignorance, poverty, fear and, above all, injustice. Hence, operationally, respect of freedom thus defined can be embodied in the strict adherence to the entire body of International Human Rights Law (IHRL) which should take precedence over national legislation. In this sense, freedom is synonymous with human development, and is perhaps the quintessential public good demanded in less developed countries.

An individual can only be free in a free society. Societal freedom operates on two dimensions: the first is the protection of freedoms of subgroups and subcultures—terms that I prefer to the current category, “minorities.” Secondly, national liberation and self determination are perceived as essential components of freedom, especially in the Arab nation, where infringement of national liberation is conspicuous.

Freedom is, however, one of those superior human culmination outcomes that requires the presence of societal structures and processes that will attain and safeguard it, ensuring its uninterrupted continuance and promotion. These societal structures and processes guaranteeing freedom are summed up in the good governance regime embodied in synergy between the state (comprising the government, elected representative councils, and the judiciary), civil society, and the private sector, all running respectful of the principles of national public administration. This good governance regime is founded on the principle of protection of key freedoms which include:

1. the freedom of opinion, expression, and association (assembly and organization in both civil and political society) in harmony with the international human rights law;
2. full representation of the people in governance institutions;
3. institutions that work efficiently and with total transparency and that are subject to effective inter-accountability based on the separation of powers and direct accountability before the people via periodic open, free, and honest elections;
4. application of the law to all without exception in a form that is fair and protective of human rights;
5. a competent, honest, and totally independent judiciary to oversee the application of the law and implementation of its rulings efficiently vis-à-vis the executive authority.

This model of good governance ensures both freedom as well as justice. Since justice is the paramount value in Islam, this concept of freedom, incorporating justice and the associated model of good governance, would be inherently suitable for predominantly Muslim societies such as those of the Arab countries.

Democracy or good governance?

Liberal democracy has, for good reasons, acquired negative associations in the Arab world because of the possibility of democracies co-existing with significant violations of civil and political liberties. In Arab and other “less developed” countries “democratic” arrangements have been utilized to prop up despotic regimes. More alarmingly, western liberal democracies of the US, UK, Italy, and Spain that have long been considered models of freedom and democracy, were all partners in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Such countries have lost all credibility to preach freedom and democracy to the rest of the world, as it has become clear that such preaching is nothing but a thin veil for imperialist ambitions and designs.

Instead of the concept “democracy” which is often relegated to “electoral democracy,” we might instead speak of “good governance.” Historical experience shows that elections, even if fair and honest, are not sufficient to attain good governance, especially in regard to the dimensions of freedom and justice. In the context of US imperialism, managed elections have often been used as a cover for sordid US meddling in other countries affairs. It is difficult to imagine, for example, how elections can be fair and honest under the yoke of foreign occupation, in itself a sinister violation of the fundamental constituent of freedom as we define it: national liberation and self determination. As such, it has become the latest confirmation of the western hypocrisy and double standards that western powers insist that Syria withdraw its forces from Lebanon as a prerequisite for free and honest elections, while turning a blind eye to elections taking place under similar conditions of occupation in Palestine and Iraq.

“Oriental Despotism” and the Arab societal context

The pure model of freedom, in its comprehensive sense as adopted here, and the model of good governance guaranteeing such freedom, both face significant conceptual and practical challenges in Arab countries due to a combination of global, regional, and local circumstances. Since the fall of Baghdad in the mid-thirteenth century and until the collapse of the Ottoman state, the Arab situation was characterized by the absence of freedom and the receding of an intellectual culture of reason, faced with the spread of a culture that emphasized the metaphysical and the mythical, and a state of intellectual inflexibility as a result of “closing the door of independent reasoning and interpretive scholarship, or ijthad.”

Despotism came to be considered the principle element in explaining the slow progress or underdevelopment in the “East.” This explanation was buttressed by the suffering imposed on the Arab East by despotic rulers and governors, and given further support by the dominant influence of obsolete customs and practices in people’s lives, not to mention the absence of freedom, in its comprehensive sense. At the same time, this freedom was spreading widely, to varying degrees, among countries of the West. As a result, we are now facing two binary syndromes: “freedom/progress” and “despotism/retardation of progress,” metonyms for the “East/West” duality.1 This severance between “the East” and freedom (or democracy) gained new purchase with “the clash of civilizations,” and efforts to play up and magnify this distinction since the catastrophic events of 11 September, especially given that the present US Administration’s chosen response was to launch what came to be known as the “global war on terrorism.”

Justice is the paramount value in Islam. A concept of freedom that incorporates justice and the associated model of good governance would be inherently suitable for predominantly Muslim societies such as those of the Arab states. The pure model of freedom, in its comprehensive sense, and the model of good governance guaranteeing such freedom, both face significant conceptual and practical challenges in Arab countries, due to a combination of global, regional, and local circumstances.
Many expressed the view that the Arabs and the Muslims are not demo-
cratic, and we can hardly take issue with that. But more seriously, a few
claimed that Arabs and Muslims are not capable of being democrats,
for the very reason of being Arab (“the Arab mind”) or being Muslim,
as though they had a genetic flaw or inherent aversion to freedom and
democracy. Such a flawed but habitual linkage betrays an absence of
thoroughness on the part of the researcher and can be compared to the
erroneous conclusion that repression and piety were inextricably linked
with Catholicism in certain countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe,
and East Asia thirty years ago, when some falsely attributed despotism
to Catholicism, precisely as some people now attribute despotism in Arab
countries to Islam.

Democracy and religion

Democratic institutions must be able to create and formulate policies
freely and independently, within the boundaries set by the constitution
and human rights. Specifically, there should be no privileged position
for religious institutions such as would permit them to dictate policy to
a democratically elected government.

By the same token, individuals and religious groups must be guaranteed
independence vis-à-vis both their gov-
ernment and other religious groups. This independent arena must protect
the right of people and groups not only to worship as they wish in pri-
vacy, but also to promote their values in civil society by creating organiza-
ations or movements within political society, provided that such activity has
no negative impact on the freedom of other citizens or breaches democratic
rules and principles. Institutional prin-
ciples of democracy mean that it is un-
acceptable to prohibit from the outset
any societal group, including religious
groups, from forming a political party. It is only permissible to impose
restrictions on political parties once their actual conduct has led to acts
inconsistent with democracy, and where it is the judiciary, and not the ruling
party, that makes the ruling.1

Interestingly, in advanced western countries that are incontestably
democratic, religion is not at all distant from political society—to the
point, in fact, that some theorists argue that no existing western de-
mocracy can claim to have a hard-and-fast separation between church
and State, having reached the point where “freedom of religion” does not end
with practicing religious rites in privacy, but extends to the
right to organize in civil and political society. Indeed, some theorists
maintain that neither “secularism” nor “the separation of ‘church’ from
State” constitutes an essential property of democracy.2

Democracy and Islam: potential for harmony

Islam, in the Sunni sect prevalent in Arab countries, has no “clergy” and
no “church,” and consequently the concept of religious authority or rule
does not arise. Even in Shiism, contemporary ijtihad or scholarship favours
“the authority of the ummah (nation),” rather than “the authority of the
fapgh [jurisprudent].” Such is the opinion of Ayatollah Muhammad Mahdi
Shamseddin, Head of the Shiite Supreme Council of Lebanon, who ruled
that “During the period of occultation, the ummah, or nation of Muslims,
reclames governance authority (wilaya), and appoints the ruler or rulers
by means of choice and election. Through its will the nation (ummah)
grants the temporal governance, and if dissolution or substance is limited.”

If Islam does not set out a detailed and comprehensive system for good
governance in its sacred text, the dominant trend in Islamic jurisprudence
is supportive of obligatory consultation and freedom, without prejudice
to the rights of others. The essential principles thus include obligatory
consultation (al-shura), respect for freedom, and accountability of the
ruler. Specifically, enlightened Islamic interpretations find in the tools of
democracy—when used properly—one possible practical arrangement
be effected through a genuine project of Arab

reign. But it is equally certain that Arabs
crave an end to authoritarian rule, and long for a
democratic form of governance, as the results of
the World Values Survey, indicate. A
According to
the results of this study, Arab respondents were
decisively on the side of knowledge acquisition
and good governance. Among the nine regions, including the countries of the advanced West,
the Arabs headed the list of those who agreed
that “democracy is better than any other form of
governance.” By the highest percentage, the Arab
respondents rejected authoritarian rule (a power-
ful ruler unconcerned with and unhampered by a
parliament or elections). These results are entirely
logical: it is only natural that those who bear the
scars of authoritarian rule and tyranny will be the
more intent on having freedom and good govern-
ance.

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Notes
1. See Al-Darwish, 67. See for example Stepan, 223.
2. Al-Fikr al-Falsafi al-'Arabi al-Mu'asir (The Concept of Freedom in Contemporary Arab Philosophical Thought) (Al-Mustaqbal al-
'Arab, October 2002).
3. See for example Stepan, 223.
4. Muhammad Salim al-Awda, ed., Al-Fiqh il-
Islam 5 tanq al tadil/Islamic jurisprudence
on the road to renewal, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Al-
Maktab al-Islami, 1998), 61-63; Muhammad
Shamseddin, 199.
5. Al-Awda, 58-59, 72.
6. An extensive international study, the World
Values Survey, 2000-2001, presents an opportuni-
ty to assess the relative preferences of Arab
people in comparison with people of other
regions and cultures, on issues of freedom
and governance. The results presented
in this study are based on field surveys
conducted in a large number of countries in
the world, including four in the Arab world
(Jordan, Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt) (see
World Values Survey Association, 1995-2001, World Values
Survey Association (WVSA), Stockholm,
website: www.worldvaluessurvey.org).