

# MERIA

## **WHY THE ARAB SPRING FAILED: THE CULTURAL ROOTS OF THE ARAB PREDICAMENT, A REVIEW ESSAY OF TAREK HEGGY'S *THE ARAB COCOON* AND *THE ARAB MIND BOUND***

By Jonathan W. Pidluzny

*Every year, life in the Arab Middle East gets worse for its inhabitants. Tarek Heggy's books *The Arab Cocoon* and *The Arab Mind Bound* (2011) argue that cultural factors are to blame. With all eyes focused on the Arab Spring, his books did not receive the attention they deserved on publication. They are worth revisiting today, because they help to explain why the Arab Spring failed. Heggy argues that a "Bedouin model" of Islam spread wildly in recent decades with ruinous consequences for the region's educational system and its politics. This essay traces Heggy's argument and explains why his cultural critique is also an argument against democratizing reforms.*

The Arab Spring and the events that have followed will mark a turning point of lasting historical significance for the Arab world, though not the one Western observers envisioned when popular unrest first burst to the surface in 2011. With the hopes roused by the "Arab Spring" extinguished (or worse) in virtually every country affected by its revolutions, the question Tarek Heggy took up in two books published as protestors first took to the streets is more urgent than ever. *The Arab Cocoon* (2010)<sup>1</sup> and *The Arab Mind Bound* (2011)<sup>2</sup> boldly ask why the Arab world has proven so resistant to progress in all its forms. The books did not receive the attention they deserved when they were first published, probably because they offered a grim assessment of the Arab world's predicament at a time the world was giddy with hope, naively confident the Middle East was finally on the cusp of meaningful, ground-up, democratic reform.

Heggy, a prominent advocate of political reform in Egypt and a successful oil-industry executive, published the first book before Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in a Tunisian fruit market set the region ablaze, and the second, in early 2011, just as the uprisings were beginning to gain momentum in Egypt. As a result, the author could only comment on the Arab Spring in passing, in an

optimistic note appended to the second book just prior to its publication. "I am certain," he wrote, "that the revolutions of the youth of the middle class... will bring about the required change within the structure of the Muslim mind, Muslim culture and Islamic religious teaching."<sup>3</sup> Although Heggy's hopes have been disappointed, his analysis of the political and cultural milieu in which the revolutions unfolded is all the more pertinent in light of the devastation it has wrought. In fact, his analysis helps to explain the failure of the Arab Spring, even though he did not, himself, predict it would fail. The account Heggy puts forth--that it is Arab culture, broadly construed, that is holding the region back--helps to explain why steps toward openness and democracy can have illiberal and destabilizing consequences.

The problems Heggy catalogues are well known. According to virtually every metric, the Arab world's economic and political systems perform appallingly. The region's governments are among the most corrupt on the planet; untouched by the third wave of democracy, the Arab world cannot, to this day, claim a single functioning liberal democracy; respect for the rights of women and minorities--never a shining example for the world--has deteriorated since the Arab Spring catapulted Islamist parties to power; abject

poverty remains widespread, and opportunity for economic advancement nonexistent for huge proportions of unusually young populations; and violent ideologies claiming a basis in Islam's sacred texts inspire new adherents every day, who are tearing the region apart. The region fares no better in literary and intellectual pursuits. In spite of the Arab world's impressive achievements in the sciences and the arts during its golden age, the region makes very few cultural or scientific contributions of global importance today.<sup>4</sup>

Efforts to explain the region's seemingly intractable resistance to progress and development, many of which blame America, the West, and Israel for the Mideast's problems, have yielded an immense literature. Heggy's answer sets his books apart. He dispenses with the familiar tropes: No, U.S. foreign policy and the existence of Israel are *not* the primary reasons for Mideast malaise. Nor does he blame European colonialism, the global capitalist system, or the league of autocratic rulers who clung (and in places, continue to cling) to power thanks to oil revenues or outside military aid. Instead, Heggy draws on his cosmopolitan background, long experience in the region as a businessman, and discussions with public intellectuals of every persuasion to offer a profound critique of the Arab mind.

As the titles of Heggy's books suggest, the root cause of the region's endemic problems is not something outside of it; the problem is the region's culture, a concatenation of insular beliefs and habits of mind nurtured and sustained by forces particular to the Arab world. The mindset Heggy describes prevents those affected by it from adopting the aspects of Western civilization that make progress possible. When Heggy uses the word "progress," he has in mind a kind of updated, twenty-first century, Kantian Enlightenment conception of the term. He places high emphasis on respect for individual rights, government according to the principle of consent that is also limited in its scope, widespread public confidence in the power of human reason to drive the sciences forward,

the celebration of creativity and art, a tolerant civil sphere, gender equality, free markets, non-sectarian public administration, and the utilization of modern management techniques.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the West, today, protects and cultivates these things to a historically unusual extent makes it worthy of emulation.<sup>6</sup>

While there is considerable overlap between the two books, they are intended to be companion volumes. The first, *The Arab Cocoon*, demonstrates how the Arab world's cloistered mindset stands in the way of progress and argues that very much can be learned from the West. (His advice to Arabs is coupled with a breathless criticism of U.S. foreign policy. Heggy complains that the United States too often deploys its considerable power in pursuit of the country's short-term interests, and he believes the U.S. government should be doing more to promote democracy abroad, which would be good for citizens living in emergent democracies as well as U.S. interests in the long run.) Of the two, the second book, *The Arab Mind Bound*, is by far the superior volume. Its central contention--that a brand of medieval Islam long relegated to the Arabian Peninsula is resurgent to a crippling effect today--is an insight truly pregnant with significance. Pushed to its logical conclusion--and the "Arab Spring" seems to be doing this for all the world to see--the basic argument of the second book sits uneasily against the democratic optimism of the first.

Heggy's honest exploration of the region's "backwardness" (a term he uses freely) takes him into terrain few commentators dare tread: Islam--or to be precise, a literalist and politicized manner of interpreting Islam--is an important, probably the most important, contributor to the Arab predicament. Almost as dangerous, he challenges the comfortable assumptions of Western *bien-pensants*. No, not all cultures are equal. Yes, cultures can be judged; and yes, the political regimes of the West (though flawed to be sure) are superior to the alternatives, especially those being tried in the Arab-Islamic world today.

The core of Heggy's most important contention is encapsulated by a metaphor he puts forth in *The Arab Mind Bound*. Arab culture is "shackled with two heavy chains": attached to one is the species of Islam promulgated by Saudi Wahhabis and to a lesser extent, the Muslim Brotherhood; attached to the other is a dysfunctional educational system that perpetuates the "defective thought processes, intellectual distortions and negative delusions" that yield endemic stagnation in every sphere.<sup>7</sup> It follows that no attempt to address the myriad political and economic problems facing the Arab-Islamic world will be successful absent cultural--and thus, educational--reform; but as Heggy demonstrates, there are institutional and ideational obstacles in the way of both. The very forces responsible for promulgating the most rigidly insular brands of Islam have, over the course of decades, wrested control of schools and universities from liberally inclined modernizers. By the end of the books--especially in light of the failure of the Arab Spring--readers are left profoundly pessimistic about the possibility of meaningful cultural reform in the short term. All roads lead back to the university, the school, the mosque and the public intellectual; and the same pre-modern ideas have infiltrated, captured, and corrupted all four.

Heggy is not the first to suggest a binding of mind is the root cause of the region's problems, nor is the problem without historical precedent or roots. Others, notably Robert Reilly in his book, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind*, have traced the genealogy of this cultural "suicide" (Reilly's term) to intellectual developments that began to ossify Islamic jurisprudence, philosophy, and theology a millennium ago.<sup>8</sup> Heggy does the same, effectively though in much less detail, recounting a story that begins with an eleventh century disagreement between a theologian and Islam's great medieval philosophers. In a work called *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazali argued that the understanding of nature and God put forth by Greek philosophy was incompatible with Islam's account of the cosmos, according to

which an omnipotent and willful God created the universe. Contemporary accounts of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy (alive and thriving at the time thanks to the popularity of al-Farabi and Avicenna) posited an eternal universe knowable to rational human beings. Al-Ghazali's argument, bound tightly to Islamic scripture, purported to refute the Greek view, root and branch, in order to preserve the conception of God put forth in the Koran.

Averroes, one of the greatest contributors to medieval thought, tried to preserve the gifts of the Hellenistic world from al-Ghazali's assault. He argued that the Divine Law endorses philosophy, that reason and revelation are compatible in Islam. Thus, he insisted that the human intellect is properly turned to, and can profitably investigate, the wider world and the claims of scripture (giving allegorical interpretation to those which fail to withstand rational scrutiny). Al-Ghazali's understanding won out in the East to devastating effect (though Averroes helped save the legacy of Athens for the West).<sup>9</sup> Philosophy--man's investigation of nature, the human good, the best political regime, etc. *by his reason*--was discouraged in the Arabic-speaking world in favor of a dogmatic adherence to sacred texts for answers to metaphysical as well as political questions.

Other thinkers achieved a similar feat in the juridical sphere. Ibn Taymiyyah, and much later, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, argued that an upright Islamic community willingly tethers itself to Islamic law as derived from the Koran, the Sunna, and the consensus of Muhammad's companions, which effectively erased generations of Islamic commentary (some of it modernizing).<sup>10</sup> On this understanding, there is no place for democratic lawmaking. Just laws instantiate the revealed will of God--the only legitimate source of legislative authority--and should therefore be enforced by the community's temporal authority through the penal code. Since the juridical interpretation of scripture was completed centuries ago, the political community is effectively bound to pre-modern legal codes and legal reasoning (for its own

good). On this understanding, modern inventions like the separation of church and state are forbidden; so, too, is the creation of positive law by deliberative legislatures responsible to, and selected by, the people. To do either is tantamount to the usurpation of divine authority by human beings. Returning the discussion to the Arab world's present predicament, it is not hard to see why a political community dominated by these assumptions would have trouble making "progress" or embracing political systems devoted to instantiating the principles of political liberalism. Heggy puts it bluntly: Al-Ghazali's victory is the reason "Arabs have become spectators rather participants on the stage of life."<sup>11</sup>

Contra Reilly, however, Heggy makes the case that the anti-rational, "rigid and medieval," model of Islam was, for much of history, a "marginal and ineffectual" heterodox view of a small minority--the isolated Bedouins living on the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>12</sup> Until the mid-point of the twentieth century, what Heggy calls the "Turkish-Egyptian model of Islam"--a manner of practice that "adopted an enlightened approach to religion"--seemed destined to prevail in the Arab world.<sup>13</sup> Signs of progress were everywhere. Led by Ataturk, Turkish republicans had opted to emulate the West, turning their back on their Ottoman-Islamic past in favor of a secular society along European lines; under the Shah, Iran appeared to be following suit; Beirut and Cairo were thriving intellectual centers; Arab universities were providing an increasingly liberal education to an emergent middle class; and minorities were for the most part reasonably well treated.

At the same time, however, twentieth century Islamists were quietly working to rehabilitate, radicalize, and spread the inward-looking "Bedouin model." The most important among them are becoming familiar names, even in the West, as scholars and political commentators try to understand the resurgence of a radicalized Islam that has impacted communities from North Africa through to Pakistan. For Heggy, Sayyid Qutb

exemplifies the twentieth century Islamist intellectual.<sup>14</sup> Qutb was an influential Egyptian member of the Muslim Brotherhood midcentury, ultimately put to death by President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1966. His thought further politicized the Brotherhood by welding Wahhabi ideas to the Brotherhood's brand of political Islam in Egypt;<sup>15</sup> this caused a number of violent organizations, including Hamas, to splinter from it. In addition to his calls to establish an Islamic government, Qutb popularized an idea that lies at the heart of al-Qa'ida's ideology. The Muslim world, on his account, had fallen into a condition of widespread ignorance (*jahiliyya*) reminiscent of what Muhammad faced in Arabia. In order for Islam to spread freely, the obstacles in its way--insufficiently Islamic rulers, Israel, the United States, etc.--must be driven out of the region, by violent jihad where necessary.

Of course, Qutb and those like him ground their arguments in the Koran and the *hadiths* in an attempt to coopt their tremendous authority. Heggy acknowledges that this rigid, and sometimes violent, manner of interpreting Islam has deep roots, having emerged over centuries from the hard, arid, and isolated tribal life of the peninsula. He insists, however, that Islamic scripture does not mandate the Bedouin model; rather, the Bedouin model is a reflection of the geographic and sociological conditions under which it emerged--the arid desert plains of the peninsula.<sup>16</sup>

On Heggy's account, the peninsula's puritanical understanding of Islam's tenets spread throughout the world to create a ruinous mindset, one that suffuses almost every aspect of social and political life. Heggy describes the resultant "Arab mentality" as "a mixture of emotions, excitability and confused thinking, characterized by an overwrought imagination that is totally divorced from reality, rooted in the past, and based on sectarian or ideological considerations."<sup>17</sup> While Heggy is careful to note, even to insist, that Islam is not a monolith, he often describes the mentality that binds the Arab mind as though it is today almost ubiquitous. Widespread anti-Western prejudice leads to a

Pavlovian rejection of anything resembling a marketplace of ideas and, thus, intellectual stagnation across the scientific disciplines persists; an inclination to excessive self-praise rooted in distant glories (and with it, an incapacity for self-criticism) undermines the toleration of diversity and runs contrary to respect for minority rights; the paranoid fear that Western culture will destroy Arab identity if any of its dominant features are embraced makes compromise by Islamists with Western actors difficult; public apathy inspired by the account of God as an all-powerful and willful being (and the parallel depreciation of the individual as capacious agent) has crippled efforts at democratic reform where they have been tried.<sup>18</sup> Heggy's list is a long one.

The dissemination of this new brand of Islam was not inevitable. The better part of *The Arab Mind Bound* is devoted to explaining why the Bedouin model of Islam has spread, and to cataloguing its long list of pernicious effects. This is one of the greatest contributions of either book; and it is here that one finds a more nuanced discussion of the respects in which Western actions have contributed to the Arab predicament.

The factors Heggy identifies are wide-ranging, though most of them are recent by historical standards. The binding of the wider Arab mind begins, for Heggy, around World War I; its aftermath (in particular, the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the English occupation of Egypt) dealt a first, though very survivable, blow to the emerging "Turkish-Egyptian" approach by humiliating at an instant those whose identity was tied up with Islam.<sup>19</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 to fill that space, a deliberate response to Ataturk's abolition of the Caliphate; its express aim was to Islamize Egyptian culture such that political reform--ultimately the reestablishment of the Caliphate--might follow in time. The legacy of colonialism and the steady influx of Jewish migrants into neighboring Palestine helped the Brotherhood's message to resonate with ordinary Egyptians. Under the pressure of religious oppression, as Brotherhood leaders suffered and collaborated in Nasser's prisons,

the organization's ideas grew more radical.<sup>20</sup> The Israel-Palestine problem that emerged in the ensuing decades, and especially the humiliation of 1967, helped to increase the appeal of politicized religious rhetoric by demolishing at an instant the promise and appeal of Arab nationalism (a more or less secular ideology). The same events helped the "Wahhabi influence to infiltrate al-Azhar," as Gulf money spread Wahhabi ideas throughout the Middle East and Africa.<sup>21</sup> The utter failure of socialist movements in the region, most of which quickly morphed into the brutal military dictatorships that persisted into the twenty-first century, further undermined the appeal of Europe's political ideas. So too, the pervasive lack of economic opportunity in Egypt today, in the context of widespread corruption, helps Islamist criticisms of the state and its broader agenda to resonate.

American and Western intervention, meanwhile--whether on behalf of Israel or in support of the region's dictators--has had a similarly unintended, if inevitable, consequence: Islamist parties across the spectrum have championed the Bedouin model of Islam alongside hyperbolic denunciations of America and the West to tremendous effect. It is, after all, easier to argue that America is the problem and that "Islam is the solution; the Koran is our constitution" (this is the Brotherhood's slogan)--even that the region's problems are the result of insufficiently strict adherence to Islamic law--than it is to argue that something about the region's own defining ideas has left it in irreconcilable tension with modernity. It does not help that wealthy Saudis spend billions every year to disseminate the Islamist ideology born on the oil-rich peninsula and to fan the flames of hatred.<sup>22</sup>

All in all, the twentieth century was a terrible one for the Arab world, one of the worst in a history full of glory, conquests, and cultural achievements. Widespread popular anger, born of these and other humiliations, is, for Heggy, the passion that helps violent and political interpretations of Islam to win hearts and minds in the region.<sup>23</sup> The harder, politicized brands of Islam are on the ascent

today because they provide a “psychological refuge.”<sup>24</sup> As Fouad Ajami explained more than 20 years ago in his brilliant book *The Arab Predicament*, the brazen intrusion of the West--militarily but also culturally--combined with the contemporary weakness of Arab states “created a deep need for solace and consolation, [for which] Islam provided the needed comfort.” Ajami went on to make a further, prescient, point (in reference to Iran’s 1979 revolution): “Fundamentalism may be too incoherent to govern, but it can topple the world of the elites, shatter their illusions, demonstrate that they have surrendered to the ways of the aliens.”<sup>25</sup> That is the Arab Spring in a nutshell.

Heggy understands and even emphasizes that “[i]deas can only be fought with ideas, beliefs with beliefs.”<sup>26</sup> It is thus surprising that he says so little about Islam’s most successful modernizers, past and present. Ataturk, for instance, perceived that a truly republican Turkey would only emerge alongside his constitutional reforms over the course of generations, contingent upon comprehensive educational reform (as well as the close supervision of the mosques and the liberation of Turkish women). Abdolkarim Soroush, the great Iranian modernizer of our time, makes a similar argument. Although he is not a secularist along Kemalist lines, he argues that Islamic states can sustain morally upright constitutional democracies, but only if they willingly embrace certain Western commitments--above all, the notion that human beings have natural rights.<sup>27</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini, too, took for granted that successful political reform rests on soulcraft, albeit to antithetical political effect. Among his first initiatives for post-revolution Iran was a thorough de-Westernization of the universities.

Sunni Islamists have always understood what scholars and politicians in the West do not: the dominant ideas, *mores*, and values of a people, which are the product of their educational institutions, set boundaries within which reformers must act if they wish their political initiatives to take hold. A country’s political history is written generations before it

unfolds, by those who control the education system. This explains why Sunni Islamists fought to control the education ministry in post-Saddam Iraq, why the Muslim Brotherhood has long emphasized its proselytizing mission (the formation of fully Islamic personalities as a precursor to political reform), and why Saudi Wahhabis have focused on spreading their influence through the Middle East and Africa by populating the universities and *madrasas* with their students.

On Heggy’s account, Egypt’s schools once promoted critical thinking by offering students a liberal education, built around curricula to expose students to the history, literature, political arrangements, and languages of the world. In recent decades, however, exponents of the Bedouin model have taken over Egypt’s schools and universities.<sup>28</sup> Heggy points out that at present, between 16 and 25 percent of Egyptians enrolled in the Egyptian educational system are studying at institutions run by al-Azhar.<sup>29</sup> As long as the Arab world remains home to the worst system of public education on the planet, the ruinous mindset Heggy describes will endure.

As such, Heggy urges countries like Saudi Arabia to purge their educational institutions of religious zealots in *The Arab Mind Bound*.<sup>30</sup> In *The Arab Cocoon*, he speaks at some length of the need for an “educational revolution” in Egypt, one that would replace an educational philosophy based on rote memorization with one that encourages students to read widely, learn English, grapple with new ways of conceiving man’s relationship to God, and consider alternative ways of organizing society.<sup>31</sup>

His books are intended for a broad audience: urgent calls to action by a man deeply concerned for his country, one who has been the beneficiary of the kind education and cosmopolitanism that is increasingly rare in the Arab world today. Unlike the Brotherhood’s soothing (but barren) refrain, Heggy’s books contain the kind of hard truths that will cause many readers discomfort. He hopes his books will shake some of them loose of their intellectual chains, especially those in

a position to help push educational reforms in Egypt.

Academic readers have as much to learn, even if they are likely to find themselves irritated by the book's stylistic defects. Heggy's argument meanders at times, and the author's tendency to wander through the history of political thought like a plundering soldier, appropriating this from Kant, that from Nietzsche, and a host of insights from Arab thinkers past and present, will also frustrate certain audiences. Nonetheless, the books' stylistic defects do not detract from their main contentions or their purpose. If there is a stylistic defect worth dwelling upon, it is that his rhetoric may, in fact, be too harsh at times. Brutal honesty can turn off those who might be amenable to a gentler kind of persuasion, especially one that musters some of the old authority.

That Heggy's books find a receptive audience in the West is no less important, nor (one suspects) any more likely. They trample mercilessly upon many of the pieties sacred to academics and "enlightened" policymakers in the West. He takes seriously the possibility that culture shapes political life; he believes academics and public intellectuals are among those who shape culture (a tremendous power and responsibility); he is unapologetic in his praise for the West's virtues and harsher yet in his criticisms of the Arab world's shortcomings; and he has little time for those who see in the West's economic prowess and military might the source of every misery in the developing world. Nor does one discern even a trace of the cultural relativism that has suffused the Western university, and which is arguably responsible for many American missteps in the Middle East. For Heggy, values "form the fabric" of civilizations and cultures. Some are "exalted and sublime" while others are "degenerate and ignoble."<sup>32</sup>

The discerning reader finds pointers to political liberalism's cultural requisites throughout both books, aspects of Western civilization Heggy believes should be celebrated and embraced in the East. In *The Arab Cocoon*, Heggy goes so far as to argue that "much of what constitutes 'Western

civilization' is, in fact, the product of the accumulated experience of human civilization."<sup>33</sup> For Heggy, then, there is one universal civilization and a great number of human cultures. Many of the commitments held sacred by Western civilization are true, good for human beings as such. To put it another way, Western culture is imperfect--Heggy is critical of its materialism--but it does a better job approximating *human civilization* than any other. Thus, he insists that the many laudable aspects of Western culture be adopted without reservation, and the aspects of Arab culture standing in the way, jettisoned without looking back.

The books have practical significance too. They are a useful corrective to U.S. policymakers' naïve confidence (on both sides of aisle) that institutional and constitutional reform in the Middle East can, largely of and by itself, yield stable and liberal governments. Especially in light of the Arab Spring, Heggy's broader argument refutes the dangerous assumptions, shared by both the Bush and Obama administrations, which led the first to commit to establishing a liberal democracy in Iraq, and the second to offer American support (in word and with cruise missiles in Libya) to ousting long-established secular dictatorships in favor of new democratic (read: majoritarian) governments throughout the Middle East. President Bush's commitment to a democratic Iraq opened space for a crippling insurgency, ultimately a civil war, and helped to create a new, Iran-aligned, power in the Middle East. President Obama's (belated) support for the overthrow of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi and for free and fair elections in Egypt have, on the one hand, spread Libyan arms across Africa and opened new lawless areas to radical jihadists; while, on the other, empowering, if only temporarily, powerful Islamist factions in Egypt much less well disposed to America's interests (and less inclined to protect the rights of women and minorities). With so much blood already spilled in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Libya, it is time to abandon the fantasy that liberal democracy might spring, fully formed, from popular dissatisfaction with Mideast despots.

If Heggy's argument is right, enthusiasm for the Arab Spring and the U.S. response to it are both wrong.

Why, then, was Heggy so optimistic when Egyptians first took to the street? Why was he so confident that Egypt's revolution, ignited by the educated sons and daughters of the country's middle class, would also be led by reformers of a secular-humanist bent? He certainly expected elections would yield a government committed to real educational reform and a more or less secular constitution. He goes so far, in fact, as to venture the prediction that "the Arab mind, which I have described... will be cured of its evils during the coming decades."<sup>34</sup>

Three reasons for his over-confidence spring to mind. Ironically, the biggest weakness of Heggy's account is that he (at times) underappreciates the political significance of the very cultural factors his book does such an excellent job dissecting. His confidence in social networking technology is a case in point. That Twitter can give effective public vent to widespread frustration does not automatically mean it will prove up to a much harder task: the transmission of constructive political ideas in a divided society. Heggy's confidence that social media would help enlighten Egyptians and empower the country's modern and moderate voices--140 characters at a time--ought to have been chastened by his clear recognition that illiberal ideas with deep roots (those binding the Arab mind) held sway with a powerful segment of the population; and what about leadership? Throughout his books, he emphasizes the importance of enlightened leaders while acknowledging the dearth of liberally educated individuals in the region.<sup>35</sup> To this point, there is little evidence social media is up to the task of rearing or identifying them.

Second, Heggy simply assumes that democratic political reforms can put a country on the road to limited constitutional government, as though history has a default trajectory--progress--and it suffices to remove whatever obstacles stand in the way. He is not the first political thinker to be too much

infatuated with Kant and Hegel. Indeed, hardly anyone predicted that participatory institutions--one hallmark of the West--might empower factions intent to use the authority of the state to further disseminate, and perhaps even instantiate, a medieval model of Islam.

Knowing what one knows now, it is hard to imagine an elected government would embark on the educational reforms Heggy is advocating. Would a parliament dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood even consider transforming public education in Egypt, deemphasizing religious learning in favor of the liberal and technical arts? Would President Muhammad Mursi have stood before the scholars at al-Azhar and called for a religious revolution, as President Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi did in January 2015?<sup>36</sup> The turmoil of the last four years has retaught an important lesson: democracy can outright empower, or otherwise open a space for, illiberal actors. The revolution brought new opportunities for participation, and new freedoms of assembly and speech, but Islamist parties employed them to further their illiberal (and destabilizing) agendas. For those who have watched the Arab Spring unfold in light of Heggy's excellent analysis, however, the mistake will be easier to avoid in the future.

This leads to a deeper, and dangerous, misunderstanding about liberal democracy generally that is widespread today. It is encapsulated by Heggy's casual dismissal of the possibility the Arab world may need a figure something like Martin Luther to counteract the Bedouin model of Islam on the grounds of Islamic scripture.<sup>37</sup> Heggy acknowledges that groups like Hamas can use elections to achieve political power--he knew the Muslim Brotherhood was Egypt's most powerful non-governmental organization and harbored no illusions about its character--and yet, in *The Arab Cocoon*, he writes, "the essence of democracy is not the high level of education of the people, but the mechanisms of change and rotation of power."<sup>38</sup> He believes that democratic institutions can bring about "a fundamental transformation in the concept of governance in the interests of the citizen." Democracy first, liberalism second,

in other words; his hope was that participation would moderate potentially illiberal factions.

However, what if the assumption undergirding so many calls to help spread democracy in the Arab world--the supposition that liberal democracy does *not* have cultural prerequisites--is itself mistaken? What if democracy (i.e. participatory institutions) and liberal governance only coincide where the citizenry has taken on a tolerant, republican, political character? To deny this possibility is to ignore the great legacy of the Protestant Reformation and the European Enlightenment: philosophers and theologians, self-consciously, built a new--open and tolerant--Western mind. The Islamists are right about one thing Westerners tend to overlook: Successful statecraft does depend on prior soulcraft. It is not enough to delegitimize the status quo. A new foundation must also be prepared.

Enlightenment thinkers like Spinoza and Locke were lawgivers of the highest order; they fashioned the opinions and *mores* that, in time, spreading almost imperceptibly, could be discovered by political legislators graven in the hearts of men and women throughout the Christian West. With Erasmus, Luther, Calvin and others, they worked to depoliticize a Christianity that had grown rigid, doctrinaire, and violent by arguing that the moral and political principles now part and parcel of Western civilization were not only compatible with Christianity, but mandated by it. At the same time, however, they laid a foundation for a new kind of regime, joining to their refutations of divine right and the propriety of religious rule, ideas durable enough to sustain a hitherto untried political order dedicated to the protection of individual liberty and the proposition that all men are created equal. They taught that human beings have natural rights, that legitimate government depends on the consent of the governed, that conscience cannot be compelled (and thus, salvation is best pursued in a private sphere protected by law).

(Judaism did not have the same kind of Dark Age to recover from--during which power-hungry priests and politicians put forth

politicized readings of scripture to support their lust for power on earth--for at least two reasons. First, the Jewish people's misfortune was of such a character as to discourage the politicization of religion; where there is no state to control, there is less reason to pervert sacred text for political purposes. Second, Maimonides' manner of scriptural criticism, which reconciled reason and revelation in Judaism--thereby authorizing the allegorical interpretation of politically delicate verses--has prevailed since the twelfth century).

Heggy is right to locate the root of the Mideast's predicament in the Arab mind; and he is right to admire the political regimes of the North Atlantic states. His books make an important and timely argument for cultural reform with force and eloquence. Indeed, the region's prospects for a better future depend on the cultural and educational reforms public intellectuals like Heggy are working to catalyze. What he does not convey is equally important, however; for the very regimes he would have Arab states emulate were not built by elections and constitutional reforms alone. They were built for and upon peoples of a peculiar temperament, themselves the product of deliberate cultural reforms dating back centuries.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tarek Heggy, *The Arab Cocoon* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Tarek Heggy, *The Arab Mind Bound* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>4</sup> For examples, *Cf.* United Nations Development Program, *Arab Human Development Report*, (New York: UNDP, 2009), <http://www.arab-hdr.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> Heggy, *The Arab Cocoon*, pp. 12-13, 34-35.

<sup>6</sup> Heggy, *The Arab Mind Bound*, pp. 27-28, 93.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Heggy, *The Arab Mind Bound*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62-4.

<sup>11</sup> Heggy, *The Arab Cocoon*, p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> Heggy, *The Arab Mind Bound*, pp. 33, 81.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57-60.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-86.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 71, 209.

<sup>26</sup> Heggy, *The Arab Mind Bound*, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, Trans. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Heggy, *The Arab Mind Bound*, pp. 18-21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>31</sup> Heggy, *The Arab Cocoon*, pp. 48-56.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Heggy, *The Arab Mind Bound*. Pp. xi-xii.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>36</sup> Raymond Ibrahim, "Egypt's Sisi: Islamic 'Thinking' Is 'Antagonizing the Entire World,'" *Raymond Ibrahim: Islam Translated*, January 1, 2015, <http://www.raymondibrahim.com/from-the-arab-world/egypts-sisi-islamic-thinking-is-antagonizing-the-entire-world/>.

<sup>37</sup> Heggy, *The Arab Mind Bound*, p. xii.

<sup>38</sup> Heggy, *The Arab Cocoon*, pp. 48, 62.