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Debate

ARAB, NOT MUSLIM, EXCEPTIONALISM

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When the editors of this journal approached us about publishing a debate featuring responses to our July 2003 essay on observable differences in political performance across Arab-majority as opposed to non-Arab-majority Muslim societies, we were delighted. Our hope was that scholars with specialized knowledge regarding such countries would seize an opportunity to refine or even refute our findings. Were our findings to survive essentially intact, we hoped the exercise would clear the way for efforts to explain them. To date, however, these hopes remain unfulfilled. The two responses at hand either fail to address our findings or misrepresent them.

The central findings in our article concerned differences in electoral competitiveness that appear when one divides the world's 47 "Muslim-majority" countries (meaning those where the population is identified as at least 50.1 percent Muslim) into those which have Arab majorities and those which do not. The strong and surprising correlation we found is that the non-Arab Muslim world has for the last thirty years been much more electorally competitive than the Arab Muslim world.

What does Burhan Ghalioun say about these findings? He does not claim that any Arab country is electorally competitive (implicitly confirming the Arab part of our findings), and he is virtually silent about non-Arab Muslim-majority countries. Thus the opportunity for any comparative explanation is lost.

Ghalioun laments the absence of "alternation in power" in the Arab world, yet he never explicitly endorses free and fair elections as one step toward remedying this situation. He even asserts that "quantita-

tive analyses' founded on hard-to-evaluate concepts such as 'competitive elections' do not seem pertinent." There are, of course, borderline cases with respect to contested elections, but if there are no elections at all, or single-candidate "plebiscites," or elections only for toothless legislative bodies, are these really so hard to evaluate? In fact, our analysis of current Arab incumbents was a *qualitative*, not a quantitative one.

Ghalioun invokes the "populist or nationalist regimes that inaugurated the postindependence era. Despite their authoritarian character," he argues, "these populist regimes achieved grand transformations upon the path of democratization and modernization." Some blows against foreign occupation, yes. Some modernization, yes. But these Arab one-party regimes often reversed earlier advances toward liberal political practices.¹ Most pertinently, they never committed themselves to a *necessary* (though as all democrats know, not *sufficient*) condition for democracy—contested elections for the highest offices of state power.

Sanford Lakoff does address our argument, yet also misrepresents us in several matters and never confronts our central point. The first misrepresentation is Lakoff's mistaken conflation of "electoral competitiveness"—the actual subject of our analysis—with democracy as such. We explained that while "electoral competitiveness is always a necessary condition for democracy," it is "in and of itself . . . never equivalent to democracy." Such competitiveness is present if: 1) the government springs from reasonably fair elections; and 2) the elected government—and not some other power center—is able to fill the most important political offices.

Another misrepresentation of our argument involves Lakoff's conflation of historical and current data. We analyzed data relevant to electoral competitiveness that was both historical (1973–2002) and current (as of March 2003, when our essay was going to press). Our thirty-year assessment found that statistically, "A non-Arab Muslim-majority country was almost twenty times more likely to be 'electorally competitive' than an Arab Muslim-majority country." Our current-situation qualitative assessment found that according to the two criteria that we had laid out, six Muslim-majority countries (none Arab) were then electorally competitive: Turkey, Senegal, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Mali, and Niger. The Polity IV and Freedom House data might also have justified including Nigeria and Albania in this list, but we concluded that each fell a bit short of our criteria, so we chose not to list them.

Ignoring our clear distinction between two plainly different time frames, Lakoff commits the elementary fallacy of attempting to refute *historical* data with *current* data. Armed with this fallacy, he chides us by noting that Pakistan had a military coup in 1999, that the Sudanese regime is a repressive autocracy, that a coup leader has ruled Comoros since 1999, that the Malaysian government is heavyhanded, and that Nigeria is a borderline case. All true enough, but irrelevant: We did not list a single one of these five governments as having been *currently*

TABLE—ELECTORAL COMPETITIVENESS IN ARAB LEAGUE AND NON-ARAB LEAGUE MUSLIM-MAJORITY STATES

WORLD'S TOTAL POPULATION OF MUSLIMS IN MUSLIM-MAJORITY STATES				1,053,703,200
MUSLIMS WHO LIVE IN NON-ARAB LEAGUE MUSLIM-MAJORITY STATES				784,312,000
Electoral-ly competitive states in this subcategory	<i>Country</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>% Muslim</i>	<i>Muslims</i>
	Indonesia	211,700,000	88	186,296,000
	Bangladesh	135,700,000	83	112,631,000
	Turkey	69,600,000	99	68,904,000
	Mali	11,400,000	90	10,260,000
	Niger	11,400,000	80	9,120,000
	Senegal	10,000,000	94	9,400,000
Total				396,611,000
Percentage of Muslim population in this subcategory who live in electorally competitive regimes				50.5%
Electoral "overachievers" in 2004 (electorally competitive despite having per-capita income of less than US\$3,500)	<i>Country</i>	<i>GNI per capita</i>		
	Indonesia	\$3,070		
	Bangladesh	\$1,770		
	Senegal	\$1,540		
	Mali	\$860		
Electoral "underachievers" in 2004 (not electorally competitive despite per-capita income of more than US\$5,500)				None
				None
MUSLIMS WHO LIVE IN ARAB LEAGUE MEMBER STATES				269,391,200
Electoral-ly competitive states in this subcategory				None
Percentage of Muslim population in the subcategory that lives in electorally competitive regimes				0%
Electoral "overachievers" in 2004 (electorally competitive despite per-capita income of less than US\$3,500)				None
Electoral "underachievers" in 2004 (not electorally competitive despite per-capita income of more than US\$5,500)	<i>Country</i>	<i>GNI per capita</i>		
	U.A.E.	\$24,030		
	Qatar	\$21,500		
	Kuwait	\$17,780		
	Bahrain	\$16,190		
	Oman	\$13,000		
	Saudi Arabia	\$12,660		
	Tunisia	\$6,440		
Libya	\$6,400			

Source: Population and Income (PPP, 2002) data from World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2004* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2004), 14–16, 32–33, and 38–40. Data on Muslim proportion of population and income for Libya and Qatar from CIA, *The World Factbook 2004* at www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html. The authors thank Enrique Ochoa for his help with this table.

produced by competitive elections. What we did say was that Polity IV rates all five of these countries (and three other non-Arab Muslim-majority countries) as having been electorally competitive for at least five consecutive years sometime between 1973 and 2002. In sharp contrast—and here is the analytic point of our essay—not one Arab country could be thus rated during this period.

Lakoff argues that when he eliminates our “dubious cases” we are

left with “only a tiny fraction of the world’s estimated 1 to 1.5 billion Muslims” living in countries with serious elections. Two of the cases that he wants to eliminate are Turkey and Indonesia. Yet in the former, a November 2002 parliamentary election universally judged to be free and fair produced a governing majority for the Islamic-influenced Justice and Development Party (surely among the parties that Turkey’s politically powerful military least wanted to see win), and this party named almost all the current ministers. In the latter, the two political leaders whom the military most wanted to keep out of the president’s office after the fall of General Suharto were the moderate Muslim leader Abdurrahman Wahid and former President Sukarno’s daughter Megawati Sukarnoputri. These two leaders, after the relatively free and fair elections in 1999, have of course been the only two occupants of the presidential office. Turkey and Indonesia thus clearly currently meet our criteria of “electorally competitive” countries.

How “tiny” is the number of people who currently live in non-Arab Muslim-majority states with electorally competitive regimes? A not so tiny 396 million people, representing 50.5 percent of the total population of that subgroup. More striking still, if we control for levels of economic development we see that the 31 non-Arab Muslim-majority states can boast the world’s highest percentage of “electorally over-achieving” countries.²

How many Muslims live in Arab League member states with electorally competitive regimes? None. Moreover, Arab League members have the world’s highest percentage of “electorally underachieving” countries.³ Thus as things stand now, half of all Muslims outside the Arab League, despite their greater poverty, live under electorally competitive regimes. For Muslims in the Arab League that proportion in 2003 was zero (see the table opposite). If we count the 120 million Indian Muslims plus those who live in Western Europe, Australia, or North America, it seems safe to say that more than half the world’s non-Arab Muslim population lives in electorally competitive states.

Apart from areas in which Lakoff misrepresents our original findings, there are two further areas where he accurately describes our position, but on which we fundamentally disagree.

The first issue concerns Islam. It is not clear to us why Lakoff wants to deny the observable differences in the last thirty years between Arab and non-Arab political communities in the Muslim world. Lakoff briefly acknowledges our point that each of the world’s major religions is a “multivocal” mixed bag with respect to democracy, but the thrust of his critique is to blame Islamic beliefs for democracy’s weakness in the Muslim world. We recognize the existence of the antidemocratic or illiberal doctrines and practices that Lakoff cites. Yet his analysis is static. He takes no notice of the debates that are going on *within* Islam, or the case made by a leader such as former Indonesian president Wahid,

who has spent decades arguing consistently and systematically against the fusion of mosque and state, against the imposition of *shari'a*, against the pretense that the Koran could or was meant to provide a complete legal system for a modern pluralistic world, and against attacks on the right of Israel to exist in peace.⁴ But multivocality aside, the real point, as the table makes plain, is that Islam by itself does not produce homogeneous political outcomes, and indeed is consistent with producing subsets of countries that are the world's most "electorally overachieving" and the world's most "electorally underachieving."

Arabs as a Distinctive Political Community

We disagree too with Lakoff's rejection of our notion that Arab states form a politically distinct subset of predominantly Muslim societies. Evidence to support our disagreement is marshaled in the table, which documents a notable political difference between Arab and non-Arab majority-Muslim societies. But let us say something more about how, over the last six decades, the Arabs have increasingly become a distinctive political community within the Muslim world (which, apart from the Arab states, is extremely heterogeneous geographically, politically, and culturally).

To begin with, the Arab states have undertaken major efforts to build an institutional structure around the idea of an Arab political community. The most obvious and important example of this is the Arab League. The six signatory states of the March 1945 pact that established the League (it now boasts 22 member states, including what League members view as "the state of Palestine") were in no doubt that they were building an Arab rather than Islamic political community. Their aim, as they said in the pact's preamble, was "to strengthen the close relations and numerous ties which bind the Arab States," and they cited "Arab public opinion in all the Arab countries" as a key inspiration.

While economics and culture have played a major role in the evolution of the Arab League, developing a common position on political questions, and in particular Israel, has been a central preoccupation: Egypt, a founding member of the League and a host of many of its institutions, saw its membership suspended for ten years following its 1979 peace treaty with Israel.

There is no doubt that significant political differences separate the members of the Arab League from the non-Arab Muslim-majority states. Besides electoral competitiveness, another demonstrable difference is in the international communities in which Arab League members and non-Arab Muslim-majority countries participate. For example, 19 Muslim-majority states were at one time under British imperial rule. Of the 11 Arab states among them, each has joined the Arab League and none has joined the Commonwealth. The eight non-Arab states, by contrast, have all joined the Commonwealth.⁵

The correlation, and we stress correlation rather than causation, between electoral competition and having been a British colony is widely recognized. Of the 11 former British colonies that joined the Arab League, only one (Sudan) had three or more consecutive years of moderately high political rights between 1972 and 2002 (as measured by either Freedom House or Polity IV). By contrast, six of the eight Muslim-majority states that are members of the Commonwealth reached this standard (Brunei and Sierra Leone are the two that fall short).

The kinds of intergovernmental organizations in which states participate have other political consequences. First, it is worth noting that Article 8 of the Arab League's Charter commits each member to "respect the systems of government established in the other member-states and regard them as exclusive concerns of those states. Each shall pledge to abstain from an action calculated to change established systems of government." Unlike the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Commonwealth, or the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), the Arab League does not even nominally commit its members to support democracy. This contrasts strongly with the incentives of those Muslim-majority states (Turkey and Albania) that aspire to EU membership, where democracy is a serious requirement.

Another concrete effect is the pressure that political peer groups can exert to ensure at least the presence of international observers in elections. It is an open question as to whether the participation of observers and the pursuit of other "democracy-promotion" measures have an independent effect. But let it be noted that each of the six non-Arab Muslim-majority states in the table that can be considered electorally competitive has hosted observers from the EU, the OSCE, and other institutions. The EU alone sent 230 observers to monitor the 2004 Indonesian general and presidential elections. When Bangladesh held parliamentary elections in 2001, 215 foreign observers came from as near as Nepal and as far away as Norway. The EU mission reported that the Bangladeshi elections took place in "conditions of freedom and fairness and represent an important step towards democratic consolidation." In Senegal, OIF representatives observed the presidential first-round and runoff elections of 27 February and 19 March 2000. The mission was involved in discussing problems raised by the opposition and seeking a consensus with the Interior Ministry as problems arose. The opposition candidate won what the observers declared was a free election. Turkey's elections are routinely observed by its fellow OSCE members. Mali's 2002 presidential balloting drew U.S. as well as other international observers.

UN records reveal that as of July 2002, whereas only 5 of the 22 Arab League states requested assistance with elections, 20 of the 25 Muslim-majority countries outside the League did so.⁶ Of those few Arab League states that have so far held elections worth monitoring, Yemen and Algeria have received the most international attention. Yemen's 2003

parliamentary elections were more credible than previous ones, although the extremely powerful presidency remains occupied by an incumbent who ran virtually uncontested and claimed 96 percent of the vote in 1999. Many observers were invited to witness the April 2004 Algerian presidential elections, but only after the incumbent had already excluded the most credible opposition candidates.

It seems clear that our initial findings remain intact. Indeed, when looked at in terms of the numbers of people, it is even more clearly the case that there is an important difference between Arab states and non-Arab states with substantial Muslim populations. Why this should be so remains a crucial scholarly and policy challenge.

We hope, especially when per-capita income is taken into account, that we have eliminated the basis for any theory of “Islamic exceptionalism” when it comes to holding competitive elections. Some may say that we have created “Arab exceptionalism.” Yet political communities do not exist from time immemorial. They are socially constructed in specific historical contexts. If a new geopolitical context should emerge through the forging of an Arab-Israeli agreement, backed by the international community and key Arab states, that helps generate viable and peaceful states in Israel and Palestine, Arab exceptionalism could wane for domestic as well as international reasons.

NOTES

1. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Reviving Middle Eastern Liberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 14 (October 2003): 9.

2. Adam Przeworski et al., conclude that after controlling for levels of economic development “neither Protestantism nor Islam seems to have an effect on the emergence or the durability of democracy.” *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126. For a longer discussion of our classification of over- and under-achievement, see pp. 33–36 in our original July 2003 article.

3. Our July 2003 essay focused on a distinction between Muslim-majority states that are predominantly Arab and those that are not. Lakoff correctly states that some countries, such as Sudan, do not have Arab majorities, but are members of the Arab League. Adopting Arab League membership (rather than a demographic Arab majority) as the standard actually strengthens our findings: None of the five countries (Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, and Sudan) that lacks an Arab majority but belongs to the Arab League is currently an electorally competitive polity.

4. For a discussion of multivocality in other religions as well as Islam, and more on Muslim politicians who back tolerance and pluralism, see Alfred Stepan, “The World’s Religious Systems and Democracy: Crafting the ‘Twin Tolerations,’” *Arguing Comparative Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 213–53.

5. Four Arab League members—Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, and Lebanon—also belong to the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie.

6. See www.un.org/depts/dpa/ead/assistance_by_country/ea_assistance.htm.