Introduction

Since the onset and subsequent faltering of the so-called Arab Spring, a key question has re-emerged to occupy the writings of many political scientists in particular and social scientists more generally: will the Arab region remain in the throes of authoritarianism and of conservative and radical “Islamic” thought? To answer this question, many have asserted the continued relevance of the authoritarian resilience paradigm in which defensive autocratic rulers remain powerful and proactive societies remain weak. Indeed, in the wake of the Arab Spring, the apparent immutability of some of the political structures as well as assumptions and mindsets both held and propagated by autocrats as well as by conservative and religious actors in the region have disillusioned many. The vexing relationship between “Islam,” the region’s citizens, and liberalism has been emphasized on multiple occasions, and the rise of Islamic State (IS) and other Islamist radicals has further confirmed for many that citizens of the Arabic-speaking Middle East are almost “doomed” in that they seem to be intellectually, socially, and politically trapped within an autocratic status quo. Further, many analysts have wondered if liberal freedoms and liberalism(s) in general are even widely desired in the Arab region, given that elections in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya gave power to the illiberal political Islamists. A few studies have dismissed the entire question of liberalization and democratization because of its teleological bias. Other studies have wondered why authoritarian regimes allow for any kind of liberal opposition, thus dismissing the agency of activists in its entirety with political contestation within authoritarian settings being qualified as self-interested, complicit in some ways, and not truly “anti-system,” in other words, not liberal democratic. In more conceptually inclusive studies, Arab citizens are described as seeking “democratic change,” “societal change,” “liberties,” “secularism,” “order,” “rule of law,” “reforms,” and even “secularism” and “progress”; but they are still rarely portrayed as complex enough to seek “liberal democratic” outcomes, in other words to be pursuing freedoms and political liberties methodically the way other nations were/are able to.
The colonial divide and some of its major assumptions about Arab “backwardness” and predilection for authoritarianism as well as having a “different” and monolithic culture are still present some 80 years later in the majority of studies on the region. The result is an assumption, an assertion, and a conviction that true liberals are a few Westernized intellectuals who are caught up in the tradition of the “other,” or simply absent from the scene. Indeed, the entry “liberal” and “liberalism” is absent from most dictionaries on the region. This selective historical reading is in itself based on an inability or unwillingness to perceive the original work of the region’s activists and intellectuals, which may be distinct from the work of other liberals worldwide, as fitting within the analytic category of liberalism. Yet these activists and intellectuals are advancing liberal ideas and pursuing liberal outcomes, and the region’s relationship with liberalism is considerably more nuanced, complex, and indeed richer, than suggested, as will be shown throughout this work.

Thus, the main goal in this book is to explore and demonstrate the existence and the complexities of an under-studied movement, and in so doing to problematize the dismissal and the lack of works on Arab liberals, and the conventional reading of authoritarianism and contentious politics in the region including giving consideration to the implications for the praxis of liberalism in the region given its invisibility. The aim of

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1 Many articles, books, and comments emerged in the aftermath of 2011 announcing the intellectual and moral failure of the self-proclaimed liberals in the region; *Arabs and the Contradictions of Liberalism* is an example. One writer contends, “At its noblest, the Arab Spring was propelled by a Trilligian version of liberalism. Most of its young protagonists, who risked death to defy some of the world’s cruelest regimes, did not appreciate liberalism as a complex, philosophical commitment to popular dignity and individual rights. Yet, intuitively, they aspired to something better than the suffocating repression and corruption that had surrounded them since birth under the rule of entrenched dictators. If beneath the rage on the streets the Arab Spring contained a liberal kernel, it was very much a liberalism of sentiments.” Sohrab Ahmari, “The Failure of Arab Liberals,” *Commentary* (May 1, 2012), www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-failure-of-arab-liberals/ Another observer writes, “Four years after Arab Spring protests spread across the Middle East and Northern Africa, the hopes of those initial demonstrators seem more distant than ever. It’s no secret that, with the exception of Tunisia, there is little democracy to show for the millions of people who protested and the hundreds of thousands who have died across the region since 2011. In Syria, no fewer than 200,000 people have been killed and another 10 million have left their homes … The Egyptian economy is in ruins; Yemen is overrun by militants; Libya has become a permanent battlefield; and Bahrain is mired in low-level unrest … Unlike their rivals, no liberal spokesperson or umbrella group has emerged to carry their principles into politics. Left on the sidelines, those ideals have languished … liberals and progressives were easily outplayed.” Elizabeth Dickinson, “What Happened to Arab Liberalism? Four Years after the Arab Spring, Activists Are Trying to Revive an Enfeebled Movement,” *Politico Magazine*, December 17, 2014, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/12/arab-spring-anniversary-113637
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the book is not, however, to portray the region’s current liberal phenomenon as being more significant or more powerful than it actually is or to make it more palpable to liberal and illiberal sensibilities in the West, but to help understand the scale and importance of liberal ideas and praxis, their strengths and weaknesses, and to inform an assessment of the extent to which these ideas and praxis or activism have traction and relevance in society.

To do so, this book rereads historical, intellectual, and political trends, as well as intellectual, political, and civic activism, a rereading that indeed reveals that both autocracy and liberalism are rooted in and have shaped concomitantly social and political developments in the region, even though they have embodied different communities and occupied different—and at times parallel—sociopolitical and cultural spaces. This rereading also reveals a liberalism that is rooted in the region’s political history and exposes an original, organic, dynamic and adaptable, enduring, important, and yet contentious relevant movement that is hidden in plain sight.

What has made the movement even more difficult to detect and study is that it has emerged and re-emerged and re-invented itself many times, in response to the region’s sociopolitical predicaments such as Western colonialism and the rise of authoritarianism in the 1950s. One conclusion is asserted throughout: the region’s relationship with liberalism and liberal and democratic ideas is in fact considerably more complex, local, and indeed richer, than most studies suggest.

A key contention being made in the book is that without examining Arab liberalism and Arab liberals thoroughly, one cannot possibly produce a complete map of the intellectual, cultural, social, and political landscape of the Middle East, nor for that matter understand its current state of affairs or foresee its possible future paths. More importantly, the contemporary movement is particularly important to look at because, as the book argues, it is reflective of and responsible for a number of political and intellectual changes and dynamics at the core of the region, including the authoritarian regimes’ liberalization attempts (no matter how cosmetic they are), and the revolutionary events of and since 2011 and 2012.

2 There is plenty of theoretical literature on formal and informal political opposition and participation within authoritarian settings.

3 For instance, in Liberalism without Democracy: Nationhood and Citizenship in Egypt, 1922–1936 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), Abdelslam Maghraoui argues that Egyptian liberals went to great lengths to dismiss Egypt’s culture and heritage in order to link Egypt to the West, hence liberalism’s failure in the region. As we will see throughout this book, I disagree with this reading of Egyptian liberalism and argue that Arab liberals’ intellectual and political history is multivocal, inspired by its local contexts, predicaments, and circumstances, and offers homegrown solutions.
This is not an easy project to undertake. After all, the Arabic-speaking region appears quite settled in its autocratic status quo, and conservatism seems to be the region’s dominant if not sole vibrant intellectual tradition and driving force. At the same time, the classical liberal tradition that had emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seems to have effectively suffered a loss of ideological inspiration and vitality as well as political direction. Indeed, the classical liberals’ “colonized,” “Westernized,” “paternalistic,” “elitist,” and “statist” vision of the future of the Arab world is accused of paving the way for the rhetoric and practice of the pan-Arab populists and authoritarian leftists, which became dominant in the 1950s and 1960s. The argument goes that the populist rhetoric was driven by a sense that the liberals were unable to safeguard independence from the Western powers, and to address issues of economic exploitation and more general economic weakness/inequalities, class conflict, urban exodus, and population growth at home. The reformulation of priorities and attempts to address obstacles to independence led to the rise of illiberal ideas and reactionary actors, and to the sidelining of the proponents of classical liberalism. More importantly, the reformulation of priorities devalued liberal notions of parliamentarism and constitutionalism and citizens’ freedoms rooted in a notion of tolerance and accepting of the “other,” and helped to give rise to the authoritarian order and monist systems that the region still grapples with today.

The events of the 1960s, including the breakup of the United Arab Republic between Syria and Egypt in 1961 and the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel, complicated the situation by emboldening the conservatives, namely Islamists who located the solution to the region’s many persistent problems in conservative and orthodox Islam rather than in liberalism (including liberal Islam) and leftist ideologies. At the social level, money arriving from an emergent conservative and powerful Gulf region helped to ensure that liberal viewpoints were de-emphasized, because affluence (read: social success) had a conservative, traditional, insular, and reactionary face.

This environment of authoritarian rule, ideological purists including conservative Islamists, rentier states, and petro-dollars suffocated liberal intellectuals and ideas and blunted their impact. The result was that liberals were effectively forced to hide in plain sight, harassed, silenced,

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1 See Maghraoui, *Liberalism without Democracy*.
2 The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran reinforced and accelerated these trends.
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and eliminated by their states, and attacked from both sides by their conservative and leftist counterparts, who accused liberals of perpetuating imperialist Western ideals and who claimed – and indeed still claim – that they alone speak in the name of the Arab peoples.

With the Arab Spring of 2010–2012, the region initially witnessed what appears today to be a curious phenomenon: the re-emergence of liberal ideas and of liberals as a force on the political scene, to challenge the region’s established autocrats and their apologists. But this was short-lived, as the collapse of dictators quickly led to the rise of the Islamists, who demonstrated more stamina, experience, and strategic and organizational skills. And in Syria, Egypt, and the Gulf region, the dictators never relinquished power and used all the forms of structural violence at their disposal to halt the liberal-led uprisings.

Indeed, of the many Arab countries where protests and uprisings have taken place, only Tunisia has seemed able to overcome hurdles toward a genuine liberal democracy most notably visible in the peaceful transfer of power from an Islamist-led coalition to a more liberal coalition and the adoption of a new constitution in January 2014. In Egypt, the army ousted the elected president Muhammad Mursi on July 3, 2013, and the presidential elections that followed in June 2014 brought to power the head of the army, Abdelfattah al-Sisi, which quickly resulted in a return to authoritarian governance. And the Bahraini uprising was shot down before it even started with the help of the Saudi army. Meanwhile, the peaceful uprisings in Syria, Libya, and Yemen have turned into civil wars and regional conflicts that at the time of writing have yet to be settled. The Syrian civil war has attracted armed fundamentalist groups from Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey. And the conflict has triggered foreign military interventions by illiberal powers such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey. In Yemen, the civil war that erupted in early 2015 has seen Saudi and Emirati military interventions; and Libya continues to struggle with widespread instability and violence, and has yet to make a successful transition toward united and stable governance.

The recapturing of the State by autocrats, on the one hand, and the rise of the Islamists at the expense of the liberals, on the other hand, are no surprise given their historical, fiscal, and organizational dominance in the past 60 years or so. Yet the brief but powerful emergence of the liberal intelligentsia and of liberal ideas and assertions reveal a different

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6 One conservative group from Saudi Arabia has taken on the posting of the names and pictures of Arab liberals and to regularly updating the list, named Qā’imat al-‘Ar (the list of shame), so that the public is aware of the “destructive” and “evil” individuals working against them and their States from within the region.
dimension to Arab society and political life and so provide insight into a parallel reality and movement bubbling along beneath the surface. And while the conservatives and the autocrats quickly took over the popular uprisings, liberal notions, ideas and actors enjoyed immense popularity and displayed vitality, courage, and defiance in that moment before their forced eclipse. The question thus emerges: where did these ideas and people come from, and where are they now?

It is indeed in this context of instability and regional conflagration and the resurgence of a movement of emboldened and yet still repressed activists and thinkers that it becomes even more important to better understand the intellectual and political trajectory of liberalism in the region, and liberals’ sociopolitical action, groups and projects, through a study like that undertaken in this book. The examination reveals narratives and a level of sustained activism and conceptualizations that sometimes transcend simplistic registers of nationalism, Islam, and liberalism. As will become clear, the liberals whose texts and activism are examined perceive these registers to be connected and intertwined rather than mutually exclusive. What emerges then is the authenticity and distinctiveness of liberalism as an ideology and as a philosophy in the region.

As such, Arab liberals’ discourses converge around a core set of principles that embody the key features of classical and modern liberalism including progress and the inevitability of change, rationalism, constitutionalism, individualism, freedom, equality before the law, democratic rule, secularism, social justice, and the confrontation of puritanical and radical thought\(^7\), and yet do so in a manner informed by the particularities of the region including its heritage and the political oppression that is endemic to the region. This awareness of the complexity of their environment as well as the limited space in which they can assert their ideas compels them to resort to transformative methods and tactics over time, in an attempt not just to survive their illiberal context and secure relative gains\(^8\), but also to continue propagating liberal principles.

**Liberalism Defined**

Arab liberalism is not a monolithic phenomenon; it is dynamic, multivocal, and complex. One may even speak of a number of liberalisms embodying theoretical tensions, notably over the appropriate role of the

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\(^7\) More on the key features of political liberalism hereinafter.

\(^8\) In much of the literature on contentious politics, the opposition is portrayed as weak and co-opted, mostly hoping to “secure relative gains” within a context that is dominated by the authoritarian regime.
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State and individual versus collective rights and responsibilities. Indeed, even Western liberalism has largely united in its ties Millian utilitarianism, Hegelian idealism, and Rawlsian welfarism, as well as social liberalism and market liberalism. It is a philosophy and an ideology that mixes left-leaning and right-wing values and that is thus dynamic and heterogeneous, with many elements that are rooted in the particular experience, time, and context from which it emerged. The same is true of liberalism in the Arab world, that is, the movement also reflects a multiplicity of traditions, discourses, and homegrown concepts. Comparing both Western and Arab movements here is not meant to assert the default or normative status of Western liberalisms in relation to other movements, but to assert that the dynamic and adaptable configurations of the movement do not dismiss it from the liberal analytic category. Thus, some Arab liberals draw on the strong tradition of social and political justice within Islam and other spiritual traditions to articulate a liberal point of view, such as Abdel-Rahman Kawakibi, Ali Ab al-Raziq, and Jawdat Said; this is what I call Endogenous Liberalism, so-called because of its clear local roots. Others draw on leftist, secular, and humanistic norms of justice such as the signatories of the Damascus Declaration in Syria and the Tomorrow the Revolution Party (Ghad al-Thawra) in Egypt, which I call Intricate Liberalism due to its more universal focus. Thus, some challenge istibdad (tyranny) and undue power through reformulation and reinterpretation of religious history and established traditions and political customs; others do so by challenging authoritarian and monist structures and dissecting the monolithic elements within that claim to be “natural,” “religious,” “nationalistic,” and “sacred.” Finally, many oscillate between and draw on both endogenous and intricate liberalism in order to advance liberal conceptual imaginations and configurations.

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10 For a discussion of works that have addressed the multiplicity of the liberal intellectual phenomenon in the Middle East region, see Wael Abu-'Uksa, Freedom in the Arab World: Concepts and Ideologies in Arabic Thought in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 8–12.
11 For instance, Shaykh Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi wrote that the correct Islam promotes a political order that defies istibdad (despotism) and that promotes freedoms.
12 Some may argue that Islamic thinkers should not be included within a book on contemporary liberalism as they do not fit within the liberal analytic category. I choose to include them because their thought is advancing the key concepts and principles of classical and modern Liberalism. To ignore their work then is to ignore an important contribution to the liberal culture emerging in the region. As examples of liberal religious leaders, one might think of Jawdat Said, a Syrian pacifist and humanist shaykh, as well as Muhammad Shahrur and Muhammad Habash, both prominent Islamic scholars.
Methodically, these individuals have had to work quietly, defiantly, and with great determination from both within and without the established political structures that they are resisting and trying to shape. In so doing, the movement has transformed from an early liberalism associated with the institution of the State that was elitist and endorsed a paternalistic approach, to one that is forced away from the State and that then embraces renewed ideas about how to empower the nation and the muwaten [citizen] and to liberalize the political order. As stated above, intellectuals began to move beyond the simplistic yet pervasive categories of so-called “Islamic,” “leftist,” and “nationalist” cultures in their attempts to reappropriate, make sense of, and reclaim liberal values. Activists and thinkers engaged in debates about citizenship and individuality, stressing issues of pluralism, civil rights, and political freedoms, and individuals’ right to self-rule. Even leftist thinkers who lost faith in the contentions of the radical era of the 1950s and 1960s and its focus on material inequality turned to a “liberal-ish” agenda that emphasized liberal rights and freedoms and criticized state monopoly over politics and the economy. The past two decades saw a general move away from what is considered “dogmatic thinking” or “ideological thinking” with the rise of the liberal assertion that essentialist and monolithic views and the desire for a constant or fixed future are the reasons for the region’s socioeconomic and political predicaments. The public masses, initially mere recipients of rights in the liberal Arab discourse, became part of the struggle for defining and winning those rights. This “modern” Arab liberalism has developed organically in that it is associated with identifiably homegrown or endogenous emancipatory solutions to recurring sociopolitical issues and crises.

Here it is important to say that despite this clear fluidity and dynamic nature, Arab liberalism is not treated as an open theoretical and analytical category in this work, nor does the analysis blur the ideological distinctions between liberals and other ideologues of the region.13

13 The open heuristic approach endorsed by Charles Kurzman, Roel Meijer, and Christoph Schumann, which argues that liberal elements exist in (and therefore should be examined within a context of) many ideologies in the region. In so doing, my approach to some extent hews closer to Meir Hatina and Wael Abu-'Uksa's approaches to Arab liberalism. See Meir Hatina's critique of Charles Kurzman and Christophe Schumann's “open and heuristic approach” in the study of Arab liberalism, where he writes, “[s]uch an open, heuristic approach ... blurs ideological distinctions and varied political experiences and legacies. Surely there must be an awareness of the inner dynamic and diversity within these ideologies, but without discrediting them as unworthy of analytical research.” Meir Hatina, “Arab Liberal Thought in Historical Perspective,” in Meir Hatina and Christoph Schumann (eds.), *Arab Liberal...
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The work posits that the liberalism examined is a coherent regional movement based on an a priori position that an ideology and a movement lose their core identity beyond a certain limit, and thus should no longer be given the same label. Groups and activists are thus considered “liberals” only when they are consistently working within a liberal logic and aim to achieve a set of connected core goals that are consistently and comprehensively advancing liberal principles and political frameworks. In other words, the term “liberal” is used to describe an institution or a person only when they consistently espouse and act within the cluster of core principles of the liberal ideology, and pass what I call the “comprehensive test.” With this in mind, and despite the fact that comprehensively summarizing a complex ideology and philosophy like liberalism would require its own separate work, it is important for the sake of clarity to state the core principles that are associated with liberalism, as defined and advanced in the region. In doing so, it is also important to reiterate that Arab liberalism is both inspired by non-Arabic sources such as Locke, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Mill as well as by Arabic and religious sources such as Farabi, Ibn Rushd, and the Mutazilites. And as we will see, liberals in the region have not taken the original sources or configurations as is, rather they have chosen, adopted, and developed the themes and practices that they have found so as to arrive at a (heterogeneous) understanding that is better suited to the needs and circumstances of their societies.


15 It is important to avoid broad and lose definitions of liberalism lest one concludes with Joseph Massad that liberalism is:


16 For more on the issue of origins see Larbi Sadiki, The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

The liberal core principles that they have adopted and advanced are the following:

1) A commitment to the extension of individual freedoms, to cultural pluralism, and to protecting individual interests even when they contradict or go against societal norms. Arab liberals have posited that freedom allows the individual to realize their individuality and that a free individual helps create a more harmonious (thus less prone to warfare and fragmentation) and genuine society. This right to individualism and nonconformity is related to the early realization that authoritarianism relies on ideas of collective orthodoxy, monolithism, and conformity to exist and maintain itself.

2) Related to the first principle is a commitment to civil freedoms, such as freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of assembly, and to universal (liberal) human rights including individual privacy laws.

3) The ability of human rationalism to lead toward positive change or “progress,” and thus that progress is desirable. In the classical era, liberals expected change to happen through a focus on education (see Chapter 1). Social justice, human rights, and welfare capitalism would later become the tools through which progress and change in liberal directions could take place.

4) Another core principle is related to the mechanisms of resistance to arbitrary and authoritarian power whether by the State, by society, by institutionalized religion, or by wealth. There is thus a clear commitment to advancing laws and institutions that are inclusive and that aim to prevent any one interest or class or faith from dominating at the political and societal levels, which in practice has generally meant that liberals are proponents of a secular order that advances religious tolerance.

5) Equality under the law, and equality of opportunity.

6) Constitutionalism – meaning enshrining freedoms and rights in a binding constitution that ensures checks on government power and prevents majoritarian tyranny—and the separation of powers so as to ensure that no one component of the political system can dominate the other(s).

7) Committed to rotation of political power, political pluralism, and a strong civil society.

18 There are non-liberal conceptualizations of human rights asserted in countries such as Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. These countries challenge the UN advanced interpretations of human rights, and deny their universal applicability. In this book, future references to human rights will, unless otherwise specified, be taken as references to liberal and generally internationally accepted understandings of human rights.