Since the uprisings of 2010 and 2011, it has often been assumed that the politics of the Arab-speaking world is dominated, and will continue to be dominated, by orthodox Islamic thought and authoritarian politics. Challenging these assumptions, Line Khatib explores the current liberal movement in the region, examining its activists and intellectuals, their work, and the strengths and weaknesses of the movement as a whole. By investigating the underground and overlooked actors and activists of liberal activism, Khatib problematizes the ways in which Arab liberalism has been dismissed as an insignificant sociopolitical force, or a mere reaction to Western formulations of liberal politics. Instead, she demonstrates how Arab liberalism is a homegrown phenomenon that has continued to influence the politics of the region since the nineteenth century. Shedding new light on an understudied movement, Khatib provokes a re-evaluation of the existing literature and offers new ways of conceptualizing the future of liberalism and democracy in the modern Arab world.

Line Khatib is a fellow at the Center for Syrian Studies, the University of St Andrews. She was previously Associate Professor of Political Science at the American University of Sharjah. Her research and teaching interests lie within the fields of comparative politics, religion and politics, democratic transitions, and authoritarianism and liberalization in the Arab World. She is the author of Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba’thist Secularism (2012) and has published book chapters and articles in Syria Studies, the British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, and the Middle East Journal.
Quest for Democracy

Liberalism in the Modern Arab World

Line Khatib

University of St Andrews
To Adam and Leo, and all those who make the world a better place
Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction
  Backdrop of the Project 4
  Liberalism Defined 6
  Why Is This Study Important? 14
  A Focus on Egypt and Syria 15
  Literature Review 16
  Methodology 20
  Map of the Work 22

1 Nineteenth to Mid-Twentieth Century: Paternalistic Liberalism and Planting the Seeds of Democracy 26
  Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Century: The Era of Muhammad Ali and of the Liberal Intellectual 28
  Early to Mid-Twentieth Century: Liberal Politics in Egypt and Syria 42
  Conclusion 56

2 1960s to the 1990s: The Loss of the State and the Shift in Focus and Approach 60
  Egypt: Hope and Repression 64
  Syria: The Rise of Civil Activism 81
  The 1990s: The Era of Hope, Defiance, and the Use of the Media to Propagate Liberal Ideas 101
  Conclusion 104

3 The 2000s: The No Longer Politically Quiet and Secret Activism and the More Visible Buildup 106
  “Something Is Happening in Egypt!” 110
  Syria Witnesses a Political Spring 125
  Societal Liberalism? 141
  Conclusion 142

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment  www.cambridge.org
viii Contents

4 2011–2018: Liberalism Out in the Open, the Restitution, and the Loss 144
   Egypt 145
   Syria 174
   Conclusion 197

Conclusion 199

Bibliography 203

Index 224
So many people were willing to share their knowledge and experience for this book, including activists, writers, academics, doctors and lawyers, teachers and students, friends, and friends of friends. They did so without any hesitation, in a manner so characteristic of their kindness but also bravery, sometimes without even any knowledge of me and my work. Most of them now live in exile and are no longer allowed to go back home. A few activists I talked to have since passed away and I am particularly indebted to them for their generosity, which will never be forgotten. This book is the result of my getting to know their dreams, their values, and their determination, but also their profound sense of sadness, of their time in prison that was accompanied by torture for some, and their feelings of helplessness. I thank them for being so open and honest about their ideas, their hopes, and their activism.

I would also like to thank the people at Cambridge University Press, Maria Marsh who took on the project, and Atifa Jiwa, Rachel Imrie, Emily Sharp, Laheba Alam, Amala Gobiraman from Lumina Datamatics, and many others who helped me to finalize the book. A research grant from LSE to replace an LSE Middle East Centre Arab University Collaborative Grant that was denied to me for political reasons at the time also allowed me to do extensive research from 2016 to 2018, and for that grant, I am especially grateful.

I thank my wonderful friend Robert Stewart for taking the time, as always, to read and comment on the entirety of the book. His patience, and overall support are incredibly helpful and appreciated. My student Maryam Mushtaq has done a lot of the initial research for this book and I thank her for her excellent work and her uplifting dedication.

I could never have written anything without my mom, especially because being a mom myself of two very young children has made academic work extra challenging. Her dedication and love were a crucial support for the research and writing, as was the example of her feminism in action and resolve that I finish the work I start. My husband has also made sure I can work by taking on too many responsibilities himself, in
Acknowledgments

addition to taking care of the baby every second he could, and so allowing me to sit in my office and just write for hours at a time. It takes many people for a mother to write a book! Lastly, I thank my dad, whose formidable knowledge and passion and his own intellectualism and activism set me on an academic path. Without my family and their support, none of this would be possible.