

Sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim had recently been released from an Egyptian prison when he came to the Mershon Center to talk about the role of democracy in the Middle East. He thinks a democratic government was not only possible for predominantly Muslim nations and, according to Ibrahim, it must be democratized.

He thought that it was not merely coincidental that the Arab world accounts for only seven percent of the world's population, but thirty-five percent of the world's violent conflicts. Given that the United States has been active in approximately ten of those conflicts, Ibrahim emphasized that this "surplus of violence and shortage of democracy" needs to be on the American agenda.

Ibrahim pointed out that Middle East has experienced representative government in the past. In 1798, the Middle East responded to a potential colonial threat by attempting to modernize their culture. They sent their best students to Europe to study arts and sciences, and eventually bringing home with them a liberal ideology. This age also introduced democratic ideals to Egypt, Iran, and Turkey, for example, who experienced a "democracy of sorts," and incorporated representative electoral politics, he said.

This age was not to last, however, and democracy began to dissolve after the creation of the Israeli state. Coups in Syria, Iraq and Libya moved away from democracy, turning into what Ibrahim called a "radical populist legacy."

Ibrahim said that this kind of leadership was challenged further with Israel's success in 1966, which further eroded confidence in representative government, opening the door for radical Islamist politicians to seize power. Ibrahim suspected that this resulted from frustration on the part of people who saw the failure of liberalism and populism and decided to give radicalism a try.

9/11 had ramifications throughout the Arab world. He said that many felt relief when U.S. armed forces eventually toppled the Taliban, but he added that the relief was bittersweet, representing the ambivalence felt by many who disliked the Taliban, but resented that only an alien western power could dismantle it. He said many, once again, feared colonization.

Ibrahim was in prison at this time, and he said the terrorist attacks caused an uproar among Islamicist prisoners, which he estimated to be about three-fifths of the prison population. When it was confirmed that Al Qaeda was behind the attacks, the Islamicists became concerned about how this would affect their movement. They felt that the world was not hearing that their beliefs included democratic ideas about freedom. Ibrahim confirmed that their message was not being communicated to the West, and despite being in solitary confinement, he was able to work with them to soften their rhetoric to more accurately reflect the values their groups truly promoted, which eventually culminated in a meeting of Islamicist and western leaders in Switzerland sponsored by the Canadian ambassador to Egypt. Many officially denounced violence and promoted democracy and freedom.

Ibrahim thought that democracy in the Middle East was not only possible, but inevitable. But, he cautioned, as Arab nations move in that direction, democracy will only be possible when the various political groups in the region—the Islamicists, the liberals, and the secularists—are able to merge their visions to embrace a new philosophy of government.