

# Chasing dreams of a new era in the Mideast



John Gall and Ned Drew (left); Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times (above)

In the November 2005 elections, Egyptian police restricted voting in areas contested by the Muslim Brotherhood and detained hundreds of Islamists.

## Dreams and Shadows

*The Future of the Middle East*  
By Robin Wright  
464 pages. \$26.95. The Penguin Press.

By Patrick Cockburn

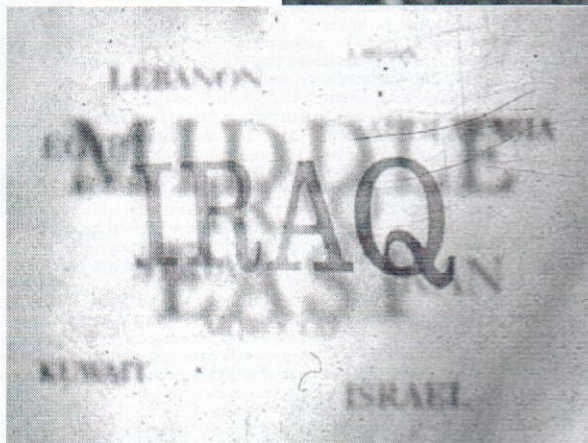
When the United States invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein in 2003, it destabilized the whole Middle East. The U.S. military had taken over the one Arab state with plenty of oil and a large population. Washington threatened to overthrow the governments of Iran and Syria. The first Shiite government for 800 years to hold power in the Arab world was soon installed in Baghdad. The entire region was engulfed by a tidal wave of anti-Americanism.

The reaction to the invasion in the wider Middle East should have led to a greater focus on what Egyptians, Palestinians, Syrians, Lebanese and Iranians were thinking. Long established autocratic regimes were discredited, less by one shining example of democracy being established in Baghdad than by their own inability to cope with the crisis. "Arab Majesties, Excellencies and Highnesses, We Spit on You" read a banner carried by protesters during a demonstration in Cairo in 2006.

Though the Middle East may be shaking under the impact of the war in Iraq, most countries have been getting less rather than more attention from Western news media and governments. Almost all the focus has been on Iraq. Newspapers and television companies strained their budgets to maintain large bureaus in Baghdad. Extraordinary events, like the victory of Hamas over Fatah in the Palestinian elections of 2006, were dutifully covered, but were overshadowed by America's ever deeper troubles in Iraq. Countries like Egypt and Morocco largely disappeared off the media map.

It is one of the chief values of "Dreams and Shadows," Robin Wright's fluent and intelligent book about the future of the Middle East, that it is not solely concerned with the war in Iraq and its consequences. In describing the struggles of people from Morocco to Iran to reform or replace existing regimes, she draws on three decades of experience in covering the region for The Washington Post and other newspapers.

Opening on an optimistic note, Wright describes how in 1983 she stood across the street from the ruins of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut after more than 60 Americans had been killed by a suicide bomber. At that time, she recalls, it seemed that Islamic fundamentalists



had the initiative and were shaping the future of the region. "Yet a generation later" she writes, "Islamic extremism is no longer the most important, interesting or dynamic force in the Middle East."

It would be good if this were true, but in general the stories Wright relates of brave reformers battling for human and civil rights show them as having had depressingly small influence. She claims there is "a budding culture of change" represented by "defiant judges in Cairo, rebel clerics in Tehran, satellite television station owners in Dubai, imaginative feminists in Rabat and the first female candidates in Kuwait, young techies in Jeddah, daring journalists in Beirut and Casablanca, and brave writers and businessmen in Damascus."

Sadly, her own research largely contradicts this thesis. Of the many opponents of the status quo she writes about, the only ones to have achieved a measure of success are religious movements: Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank and Hezbollah in Lebanon. She does not cover Pakistan, but the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Rawalpindi in December shows that suicide bombers retain their deadly ability to shape events.

Why have moderate reformers failed so uniformly across the Middle East? Not because of lack of courage. Wright describes how in Syria, Riad al-Turk, first arrested for opposing a military government in 1952, spent almost 18 years in solitary confinement in an underground cell the length of his body. He kept himself sane by making pictures on the floor out of thousands of

hard and inedible grains he had taken out of the prison soup during his years of confinement.

Wright also writes of heroes and heroines in a more minor, but still impressive, key, like Noha al-Zeiny, a leading official in the prosecutor's office of the Egyptian Ministry of Justice, who was so disgusted by blatant official ballot rigging in an election she was supervising that she publicly denounced it in one of the few Cairo newspapers that dared to print her testimony.

Autocratic regimes in the Middle East may be sclerotic, corrupt and detested by their own people, but they are very difficult to remove.

Governments in Egypt, Syria and Libya that came to power by military coups in the distant past have learned how to protect themselves against their own armies and security forces. In each of those countries, the Mubarak, Assad and Qaddafi families are establishing new political dynasties. President Hosni Mubarak, jokingly known to Egyptians as the last pharaoh, has, according to Wright, now held power longer than all but two other leaders in Egypt's 6,000-year history, and is grooming his son Gamal to replace him. Political reforms have been purely cosmetic.

Osama Harb, the editor of a moderate foreign policy journal, International Affairs, denounced Egypt's supposed reform efforts as a sham but found he could not withdraw from the government's inner circle without endangering himself. "It should be easy to resign, to say no," he observed. "But not here. This is Egypt." Just one long-established regime in the Arab world has

been kicked out by voters in a closely monitored election. It happened on Jan. 25, 2006, when Hamas won a victory over Fatah, Yasser Arafat's very corrupt nationalist movement. It was the first time, Wright says, that an Arab electorate ousted an autocratic leadership in a free and fair election — a message that resonated throughout the region. The immediate response of the international community was to boycott Hamas.

"The United States is like the prince in search of Cinderella," the Hamas leader Osama Hamdan told Wright. "The Americans have the shoe, and they want to find the kind of people who fit the shoe. If the people who are elected don't fit into the American shoe, then the Americans will reject them for democracy." Fatah was encouraged by the United States, Israel and the West Europeans to ignore the results of the election and build up its military strength. An armed clash became inevitable, leading to the takeover of Gaza by Hamas gunmen in June 2007.

Wright has long been one of the best-informed American journalists covering the Middle East, and her reputation is borne out here. She is refreshingly skeptical of conventional wisdom about what is happening in the region, and her book will be essential reading for anybody who wants to know where it is heading.

She is particularly good on the moribund nature of the regimes that now hold power and know they are too unpopular to allow any open expression of popular will (though some innovations, like satellite television and the Internet, have prized open their control of information). Both the Algerian election in 1992 and the Palestinian poll in 2006 showed that the West will not accept an election won by its enemies. But since the invasion of Iraq, it is difficult to imagine a fair poll having any other result.

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