



# Political Islam Online

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## “Muslim Democrats” and other Positive Changes in the Arab World

Taking an unusually optimistic approach, reminiscent of Thomas Friedman, author *Abdelmoneim Sa'id* writing today in *Al-Sharq al-awsat*, identifies five positive changes in the Arab World.

### The Economic Front

On the economic front, *Sa'id* cites the World Bank statistics of job creation in Egypt and Saudi Arabia and GNP growth in several countries of the region as impressive. While acknowledging the fact that the increase in oil prices contributed to the growth, he considers adoption of the “*Dubai*” model of economic development and open markets by all other countries in the Gulf region as a positive accomplishment.

### The Political Front

On the political front, *Sa'id's* discussion of the emergence of what he labels “Islamic Democracy,” analogous to the Christian Democratic parties in the West, is one of the most interesting parts of his article. The birth of Islamic Democracy was, according to the author, a response to the two unbearable choices which have dominated the Arab political scene: bureaucratic dictatorship, be it civil or military, versus radical Islamic fascism. The author sees the AK Party in Turkey as an example that can be emulated by Arab countries. He also cites that the PJD party in Morocco, although it came in second in the elections, as an example of Islamic participation in the democratic process, similar to the earlier Palestinian elections. *Sa'id* views the latest political platform proposed by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a disappointing setback because it contains regressive elements. However, he sees the critical debate that ensued as a hopeful sign for change.

### Iraq

The author considers the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the distressing daily stories of killings and suicide bombers, who prey on women, children and the elderly, as the cause, in large part, of existing Arab pessimism. *Sa'id* points, however, to what he considers positive signs, including the uprising of *Sunni* tribes against religious fascism, the recent reduction in casualties, the increase in available electricity, and the possibility of resource allocations between the parties taking shape. These changes he said, although not substantial, are nevertheless good news – something that has not graced the Iraqi scene for some time.

### The Palestinian Crisis

Following the failure of a second Camp David accord in 2000, *Sa'id* saw the vision of an emerging Palestinian nation in the nineties as torn by Israeli aggression, the establishment of more settlements and the raising of the wall. Despair among Palestinians, he surmises, led them to elect Hamas, despite what is widely viewed as Hamas' unrealistic insistence on the right of return and the establishment of a state comprised of all former Palestinian land. Following the election, Hamas orchestrated its revolt in Gaza, culminating in what the author describes as one of the worst moments in Palestinian history. Nevertheless, *Sa'id* sees this act by Hamas as a positive turning point which freed the West Bank and the Palestinian authority to negotiate, as the author puts it, to save what is left of Palestine and its people. The scheduled November conference, *Sa'id* believes can bring peace based on fundamental principles previously agreed upon by both parties.

## The U.S. Outlook

Looking through Arab eyes, the author enumerates in this section what he considers the most optimistic changes occurring in the U.S.: the change in attitude towards Iraq, the Baker-Hamilton report, the demise of the new conservative movement and Vice President Cheney fading from the scene. After years of refusing to entertain any serious initiative in the Middle East, the Bush administration proposal for a conference this Fall was a welcomed change. *Sa'id's* summary of these changes is nuanced. He explains that, even if democracy is a historical process that concerns the entire region, political action, to be effective, must be restricted to a limited number of actors. For the first time, *Sa'id* states, the Bush Administration has not only stopped combining ideology and politics, but has also stopped confusing strategy with history. *Sa'id* concludes by asking the reader to notice that while, in the past, it was Europe which was the source of logical interpretations on Middle East issues, if we now listen to the similarity in statements by Bush and Sarkozy, we realize that change is inevitable.

*Sa'id* is obviously and deliberately taking the optimistic view. He seems comfortable, however, that the various elements he details in his article justifies his optimism. *Sa'id* may be taking a risk that critics will say he is out of touch with reality. If so, he does not seem to mind taking that risk in order to help shape events.

In a stark contrast, today another writer, *Fahmi Huwaydi*, took a decidedly pessimistic view of an event *Sa'id* saw as cause for optimism – the anticipated Fall conference. In an article entitled “The Anticipated Scandal of the Fall Conference,” *Huwaydi* sees a gloomy situation in which Palestinians will relinquish their rights and obtain nothing in return. To justify his view, he relies heavily on selective quotes from Israeli Newspapers, primarily pointing to the inability of Olmert to make even the simplest concessions on the West Bank, let alone major ones. *Huwaydi* also laments the support of most Arab countries for the Fall initiative. We will soon know whose view turns out to be correct on that particular issue – the optimist or the pessimist. Tonight’s declaration by Palestinian president does not seem encouraging: “I shall not go to Annapolis at any price...”

Source: 'Abdelmoneim Sa'id & Fahmi Huwaydi – *al-sharq al-awsat* Date: October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007

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