

Middle East Today

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Mishana Hosseinioun

The Human Rights
Turn and the Paradox
of Progress in the
Middle East

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macmillan

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L’Égypte apportant la lumière à l’Orient (?)

Projet pour un phare monumental à Suez.

Aquarelle collée sur papier, par Auguste Bartholdi

19,5 × 14,5 cm; s.: B; d.: 1869

The image shows Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi’s design for a Statue of Progress to be erected along the Suez canal in Egypt. While the plan for the Suez statue never came to fruition, the design served as the basis for Bartholdi’s Statue of Liberty in New York, USA.

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FOREWORD

Circumscribing the rectangular chamber of the United States House of Representatives are bas relief portraits of 23 noted law givers. Hammurabi, Moses, Solon, Suleiman are among those represented, as is the author of the Declaration of Independence of the United States, Thomas Jefferson.

This 1857 artistic homage to internationalism, the universality of legal principles, the derivative nature of the US law, including our own Constitution, is today rarely discussed and generally ignored.

Yet at another assembly, the United Nations, the eternal verities which license and affirm human existence were brought forth and exist for the peoples of the entire world, as a constant reminder of the primacy of individual existence.

In 1948, at the UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated in Article I: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

The principles underpinning the Declaration are universal in their scope and are universally derived.

A fault line which runs through human affairs in the twenty-first century is the West’s false, self-serving, (and self-defeating) assertion that it is the well-spring of ethical standards when it comes to law, constitutional principles and human rights.

One of the horrors underpinning the assumption of the cultural, political and spiritual superiority of the West is the explicit assertion that wherever western-style political freedoms and individual rights are lacking, it is the West's divine-directed duty to export democratic rights, by any means.

The belief that western democratic ideals are the *sine qua non* of human rights is belied by the motives and actions of western governments who try to impose so-called democratic values by military force.

In today's world, military superiority falsely equates to cultural superiority, its destructive efforts to establish western norms doomed to failure.

With the vicious piousness of the crusader's passionate instincts and the calculating greed of money-changing ideologues, the West, in the name of righteousness has brought calamity to Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Syria, bombing villages to save villages, slaughtering millions to make the world "safe for democracy" and to advance human rights.

It has not been lost on the world community that the violent imposition of democratic values and rights is inherently contradictory, hypocritical and often criminal.

Hiding in the shadows of national ambition of western powers is the corporate state leviathan. Its concern is not the rights of all human beings to political freedom. Its concern is facilitating the acquisition of resources and promoting the right to shop, at a price.

This is the hegemon's subjugation of masses to market economies, a moral *reductio absurdum*. Political freedom absent economic freedom is a bauble.

Dr. Mishana Hosseinioun's scholarly explication is a tour de force of the evolution of human rights in the Middle East and the region's contribution to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights demolishes the notion of western primacy.

Dr. Hosseinioun points out the Cyrus Cylinder (539-538 BC) is officially recognized by the United Nations as the first human rights declaration in human history. She makes the case that Middle East states have contributed mightily to both the articulation and the enshrinement of universal principles of human rights through participating in the drafting of the International Bill of Rights and the Arab Charter.

Her case studies of human rights in the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Iran bring to light the "paradoxes of progress amid regress," and the contributions and contradictions of each state.

The West, of course, has human rights problems of its own, most obvious the exploitation of immigrant labor, the abuse of individuals of nonconforming genders, and in America the rough justice administered in the streets by law enforcement against people of color.

Central to her thesis is that “Western style democracy and secularism are not absolute prerequisites for the adoption of fundamental human rights principles; just the same, they do not automatically generate respect for human rights.” Cultural relativists are given short shrift in her analysis, their propoundments exposed as excuses to violate human rights.

Dr. Hosseinioun’s illumination of commonalities in East and Western ethical and human rights legal developments helps to shatter the malignant “clash of civilizations” meme, that polarizing self-fulfilling prophecy of apocalypse which is both a rationalizing subtext of grim anticipation and a justification for constant political conflict.

The underlying truth of our existence is human unity, that we are all one, that we are interconnected and interdependent. Although we may be of different religions, races, ethnicities, and countries of origin, we are all made of the same stuff of life and seek to live our lives supported by a tacit life-affirming consensus of human rights.

Dr. Hosseinioun makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of Islam with her discussion of the “four foundational cornerstones of human rights in Islam, namely the ‘Supreme Being, a common humanity, a common path to God, and a set of universal ethical-moral values’.” The failure to meet the mark is not a function of the spiritual discipline or path. It is in the politicization of religion which breaks the spiritual bonds which unite all believers and all faiths.

It is a common challenge in human experience to be able to harmonize one’s particular faith or confession with another’s without charges of heresy or apostasy. It is immeasurably more difficult when those differences are exploited for political purposes, which can lead to violence. A great significance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is its insistence on religious freedom.

Dr. Mishana Hosseinioun’s work reflects great intellectual scope and compassionate treatment of one of the most contentious issues of our time—human rights.

This book is more than a contribution to the literature. It is a landmark study which others may refer to again and again, to measure distance traveled and how far we must yet journey to arrive at universally accepted and practiced standards of human rights.

Washington, D.C.

Dennis J. Kucinich
Member, U.S. Congress, (1997–2013)

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