



# The Next Founders: Voices of Democracy in the Middle East

*Joshua Muravchik*

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The Next Founders brings to light the stories of seven remarkable people, six Arabs and an Iranian. Five are men; two, women. Four are Sunnis, two are Shiites, and the seventh is mixed. Their lives revolve around a sense of mission, and while the angles from which they attack it are varied, this mission is the same for all seven--to make their countries more free and democratic.

## **The Next Founders: Voices of Democracy in the Middle East Details**

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Author : Joshua Muravchik

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### **JoséMaría BlancoWhite says**

Seven stories of seven heterodox men and women of Islamic countries. I thought this book would be a lot of academic jargon, abstract discussion, high politics and geopolitics all mixed up, even though I had already read a book by Mr. Muravchik on Socialism and, thus, harbored some hope this book would be made as easy as possible to follow by the general reader. My hope was exceeded: the book tells the close-up stories of seven individuals from seven different Islamic countries who felt attracted to the liberalism and open societies of the West, who chose to differ from the religious and political authoritarianism of their countries' rulers, and finally decided to risk their lives defending freedom of speech, or religion, and to the protection of human rights. Most came to the United States and could get to know the "enemy" state, as their ruling classes would put it, and came to love America and the beliefs for which it stands. But one thing, above all the rest, does unite these now middle-aged group of men and women, and that is courage and ingenuity.

Each life is a wonderful story; told with the easiness and craft of a masterful writer. Intense lives. We grow and become adults along with the characters as we read. We come to understand why these individuals chose freedom and human rights and repudiated intolerance and authoritarianism. In the end, the way of life the Islamic countries gave themselves, they figured out, is just an excuse for their mullahs, their corrupt ruling classes: religious leaders hand-in-hand with the secular politicians, to have all the power safely kept for themselves, generation after generation. Religion is just a tool. The ayatollahs themselves are the greatest hypocrites, whose lives do not agree with their preaching, and couldn't care less for their religion and more for power-grabbing, sex and wealth.

The men and women of these real stories had to fight first against their own doubts and inner misgivings, religion-wise and politics-wise. With hardly anyone to share thoughts and feelings; with tradition, cradle to grave indoctrination, and the totalitarian State all working against you, molding your heart and your mind into submission, it takes more than a simple dose of courage to stand up and fight the political and religious status quo. But we are in 2013 (the book was published in 2009), even in the Middle East. And with the new technologies and means of communication, and the more and more people being able to see for themselves the world outside the Islamic curtain, it is -and will increasingly be- easier for more and more young people to challenge the regime in each of their own countries. We are seeing big changes in the last few years: uprisings in most of the Middle East countries. Though not clearly democratic and liberal in their ideologies (they largely maintain their Islamic character, sharia law included), yet they are, I believe, a step forward in the right direction, that's why the heroes of this stories can be alluded to as the fathers of future democracy in the Middle East.

This book is easy to read. It is passionately told and engaging. No need to look for cheap fiction stories. Here's the real deal: real men and women fighting to be free -specially in the case of women. They raise up their voices; we in the West should at least listen to them. If their regimes had been Catholic instead of Muslim, I bet you the liberal West would have done a lot more to put a stop to it long time ago, but we are no less hypocrites than the mullahs themselves.

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### **Terry Earley says**

I am enjoying learning about these people who are making a difference in a very dangerous region of the world. They will be part of the unfolding history of the Middle East.

## Regina Lindsey says

Joshua Muravchik has set out to write about democrats in the Middle East. When chided for undertaking a work that, in all likelihood, will be very short, Muravchik counters with, “the fact that there is precious little democracy in the Middle East does not mean, however, that there are no democrats. In fact, surveys show that the vast majority say they want democracy, although it is uncertain what that terms connotes to them.” (pg 6) Beyond just the desire to have democracy there are countless individuals working with a missile-like focus on affecting change. Muravchik highlights seven individuals, five men and two women, from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Palestine, and Kuwait who have sacrificed tremendously to bring freedoms to their countries. “They have paid dearly for their struggles. Four have been to prison, and four have had their lives threatened. Three have had their loved ones menaced or penalized. Two have recently been forced into exile, although both hope to return. One has dodged assassins and seen his children murdered. All have subordinated their material well-being to the cause for which they fight. They share an uncommon courage. For most, that has meant the courage to face prison or even death. For all of them, it has meant the moral courage to march to their own drummer in societies that prize loyalty to family, clan and tribe – and do not hold individualism as a value” (pg 7)

Each chapter is dedicated to a single individual. Muravchik takes us through the family history, the individual’s background, and how each evolved into a leader of his or her movement. While the hot buttons for each subject vary, what is interesting are the threads of commonality in each person’s background and strategies. In each case the individuals were exposed in some way to the world abroad. They witnessed injustices perpetrated on his or her family at very young ages, impacting the view of each person’s culture. Each realized the importance of arriving at a peaceful solution with Israel, while not necessarily abandoning criticism of the country or its policies. Each understood the powerful tools of free speech and free press. A few, particularly the Iranian example, sees value in capitalism and its impacts on the well being of citizens. I also think the reader benefits from an understanding of the differences in these countries histories and approaches to governing. Those readers wanting more information find a wealth of resources to follow from websites these individuals are involved in, to English versions of Middle Eastern newspapers to follow, to Middle Eastern bloggers.

One area I took issue with was Muravchik’s attempt to compare these efforts to the founding fathers of the United States. It seems to be comparing apples to oranges. The American example was limited to thirteen colonies in a single location with a constituency of a common culture and heritage with a single focus and objective. While critical of his or her country’s regime, these individuals have a nationalistic pride for his or her home country. They simple want to improve the country’s situation. Further, while democracy would provide the vehicle to promote each person’s cause, the objectives are different.

Finally, Muravchik’s opines on the ultimate question, “is democracy in the Middle East realistic?” First, he lays out some interesting historical context. “As of the early 1970’s less than 1/3 of the states of the world were governed by rulers chosen in genuine elections. Thirty years later, that share had doubled to over 60%....Democracy has become the norm. However, the revolution has until now failed to reach one region, the Muslim Middle East, where not a single democracy can be found.” (pg 9). In reflecting on the disappointing results of the Arab Spring, “Yet like the crash after a high, the gloom that enveloped Middle Eastern liberals and their Western sympathizers was as overdrawn as the earlier euphoric hopes. It took 21 years for the flowers of the 1968 “Prague spring” to blossom in the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989.” (pg 255). “We can be confident, however, that reinforcements are on the way. My seven subjects were born in the 1950’s or 1960’s; they are each in middle age. In the generation behind them the democrats is far larger. How do I know? There are 60,000 bloggers in Iran alone. Estimates of the number in the Arab countries

range from 25,000 to 100,000...In the main they are critical of what they find around them. It is hard to doubt that most want to live in freedom.” (pg 256). As evidence, Muravchik goes on to include excerpts from various blogs.

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