Looking at the political realities in the Eastern Mediterranean today, the project of publishing a volume on liberal thought seems to be daring, to say the least. Over the last couple of years, the American campaign for “democratization” in Iraq appears to be ending in a military quagmire, elections in Egypt and Palestine have led to victories for Islamist parties, and the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbollah has not only shaken the fragile political system of Lebanon but threatened the security of the region as a whole. The most tangible experience that nearly all the inhabitants of the region can connect with the word “liberal” is “economic liberalization,” and of course the idea that economic liberalization would almost magically lead to political liberalization, or even democratization, has proved no more than a “grand delusion.”

Nevertheless, there has been no dearth of debate on democratization and liberalization in the Middle East before and after the American invasion of Iraq, both in the media and among scholars. However, many of these discussions are based on a number of obvious misconceptions. First, the concept of “democratization” is often reduced to a functioning electoral process, and “liberalization” to economic deregulation. Fareed Zakaria has, however, pointed out that elections alone do not make a democracy, let alone a “liberal democracy” based on the division of powers, the rule of law, limited government, and respect for human and civil rights. Similarly, it can be said that economic liberalization does not necessarily create a society based on liberal values.

Second, there is a general tendency to overlook historical experiences with liberal thought and democratization in the region—with the exception of Israel and (to some extent) Turkey. However, a brief glance at the past shows that constitutions, elections, party systems, and political struggles for rights and liberties are not at all alien to the

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region. In fact, freedom of expression and opinion was included in most constitutions of the pre-revolutionary era. Although these constitutions have been suspended time and again, ever since the Ottoman constitution was established in 1876, the principle of constitutionalism, once introduced, has never been seriously called into question. Today, opposition movements throughout the region, far from requiring the abolition or amendment of constitutions, demand the removal of restrictions imposed on them.

A third widespread misconception centers on the tendency to overestimate Islam as the formative factor of the region’s political culture. Although most area specialists will probably disagree with the thesis that Islam or Islamism per se are obstacles to democratization and liberal thought, the words “Islam,” “Islamic,” and “Islamist” have become part of the titles of many books, perpetuating this misconception. Titles such as Liberal Islam or Islamic Liberalism, for instance, presuppose that a clear distinction can be made between an “Islamic” and a “secular” liberal discourse. This raises the question of the nature of the relationship between the “two sides”: is intellectual exchange possible across the religious-secular divide? Can we understand one side without being aware of the other? Are there any common intellectual roots? Do secular and Islamic liberals have common experiences, shared concerns, and compatible agendas? And, most important, are there norms and rules that are acceptable to both camps despite their different modes of justification?

In order to avoid these pitfalls, this volume takes a historical approach and looks at the current political situation in the Eastern Mediterranean as a contingent outcome of history. In other words, the societies of the regions are what they became. Just as in Western societies, history has two aspects: the factual legacy of past events, institutions, and structures, on the one hand, and the perceived discursive legacy of collective experiences, memories, and lessons drawn from this past, on the other. In this sense, liberal thought is fundamentally rooted in the complexity of the region’s history, with all its highs and lows. The positive example of the Ottoman constitution of 1876, for instance,

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