It is almost never when a state of things is the most detestable that it is smashed, but when, beginning to improve, it permits men to breathe, to reflect, to communicate their thoughts with each other, and to gauge by what they already have the extent of their rights and their grievances. The weight, although less heavy, seems then all the more unbearable.1

This quotation from de Tocqueville expresses some part of what I want to say, though not quite all of it. The other sentiment that I want to capture, and add to what de Tocqueville is expressing here, is that of arriving at a state of mind in which, when one had thought that some new and better state of things was within one’s grasp, there comes the realization that the longed-for change will not in fact take place—or, in more grandiose terms, that the forward march of humanity has been halted. In the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century and in their successor states in the early twentieth, this probably happened at least twice: first with the introduction, in 1876, followed two years later by the abrogation, of the Ottoman constitution; and later with the bright promise, followed soon afterwards by the far less glittering reality, of the introduction of forms of representative government in Egypt and the mandated states in the 1920s.

The first of these disappointments was largely reversed some thirty years later with the restoration of the constitution in 1908–09, but the evident inadequacy of the allegedly democratic systems introduced into the region in the 1920s left an enduringly bitter taste in people’s mouths, the sense that “we were promised such and such, and we have been fobbed off with something very inferior.” By a not entirely logical process of extrapolation, this has sometimes led to the conclusion that

there must be something inherently wrong with liberal political systems; consider, for instance, Khomeini’s resentment (in 1943–44) at the extent to which representative government had been subverted in Iran, which, it should be remembered, had had a constitution since 1906:

Look at this country and see what infamy is perpetrated in the name of ministries and representation, and what intrigues and illegalities are carried out in the supposed cause of service to the country and law… there have been 14 elections in Iran, and everyone has seen that, whether in the period before the dictatorship [of Reza Shah] or during that disgraceful time, or afterwards, that is the present, representation has not been a means of spreading justice and freedom.2

But to return to the Arab world: I am not of course suggesting that the people of the Arab Mashriq actually chose to be governed by regimes professing the slogans of Arab nationalism or Arab socialism, but it does seem that disillusionment with the objective experience of parliamentary government in the immediately pre- and post-revolutionary periods3 reached such a height that, at least at the time, there were few to mourn its passing. Also, there seems to have been a general preparedness in the 1950s and 1960s to forgo pluralism, at least for the time being, partly on the basis that “the good is national cohesion, the evil, division,”4 and partly because of the initial—and perhaps even sincere—expressions of disinterestedness on the part of those who seized power, along the lines of “let us clean up the mess and then return to the barracks.”

The Ottoman Constitutional Revolution of 1908–09 evidently stimulated a high degree of expectation on the part of those who lived through those stirring times. When the Young Turk Revolution took place in 1908, it was greeted with tremendous enthusiasm in the cities of Greater Syria5 as signifying the dawn of a new era in which the

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2 Ruhullah Khomeini, Kashf-i Asrar, n.p., n.d., 290, 180–81, quoted in Vanessa Martin, Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of the New Iran, London: I. B. Tauris 2003, 106–07. Of course, there is no sense here—and this can be confirmed by a look at the system he approved after the Iranian revolution—that Khomeini was throwing the baby out with the bathwater; he wanted constitutional reform—not a dictatorship.

3 That is, in Egypt until 1952, Iraq until 1958, Syria until 1963, etc.
