Interview – Hicham Alaoui

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Hicham Alaoui is the founder and director of the Hicham Alaoui Foundation, which undertakes innovative social scientific research in the Middle East and North Africa. He is a scholar on the comparative politics of democratization and religion, with a focus on the MENA region. In the past, he served as a visiting scholar and Consulting Professor at the Center for Democracy, Development, and Rule of Law at Stanford University. He more recently served as a postdoctoral fellow and research associate at Harvard University. He was also Regents Lecturer at several campuses of the University of California system. Outside of academia, he has worked with the United Nations in various capacities, including on the peacekeeping mission in Kosovo. He has also worked with the Carter Center in its overseas missions on conflict resolution and democracy advancement.

Hicham Alaoui currently serves on the Advisory Board of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. Previously, he served on the MENA Advisory Committee for Human Rights Watch, the Advisory Board of the Carnegie Middle East Center, and the board of the Freeman Spogli Institute at Stanford University. He holds an A.B. from Princeton University, M.A. from Stanford University, and D.Phil. from the University of Oxford. His academic research has been widely published in various French and English journals, magazines, and newspapers of record. His latest monograph is *Pacted Democracy in the Middle East: Tunisia and Egypt in Comparative Perspective*. His memoir, *Journal d'un Prince Banni*, was published in 2014. His other books include *The Political Economy of Arab Education* and *Security Assistance in the Middle East: Challenges and the Need for Change* , both co-authored with Robert Springborg.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

In my field of comparative political science, I see exciting research that builds upon our established knowledge about how institutions and states influence political outcomes. Yet there are social forces that are often not studied in an explicitly political way, but which have decisive impacts upon how people strive for democracy and change. Public education, the arena of religiosity and religious identity, and systems of representation outside the state are some important examples. In the Middle East, these issues are deeply tied to how states govern, particularly at the local level where it matters the most. We must diversify our traditional political science methods and incorporate these critical dynamics when studying the region.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I have come to understand that while we can grasp the social dynamics and interplay of variables for any given situation, time is something that we can never control. Time can slip by. Even though fundamental problems may emerge repeatedly, the political actors that matter will inevitably change. In addition, I have come to realize the importance of political culture in shaping states and societies. In the past, I downplayed culture because I was a critic of Orientalism, and its assumption that Islam and the Middle East were essentially allergic to democracy and liberalism. However, while my critique of Orientalism remains unchanged, I recognize now that culture should be understood and historicized as part of the backdrop of any political scenario. In the lexicon of comparative politics, I see culture manifesting as a malleable set of national repertoires that include the ideas, conceptions, and identities that underlay social meaning and relations in any given country or region.

In *The Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World,* you claim that the current halt in democratic activism within the MENA region is only temporary and you expect popular forces to mobilise once again. What gives you such optimism?

The yearning for democratic freedom, economic justice, and human dignity is ceaseless, especially among our youngest generation. The old formulas of authoritarian rule, whereby stability and prosperity were promised in exchange for loyalty, are obsolete. People themselves are reasserting the fundamental right to redefine the meaning of citizenship, and this means having a meaningful voice in how they are governed. We may see an abeyance of popular protest today, but this is only a temporary reprieve. The demand for democratic participation will never disappear. The only questions are how long remains before the next outbreak of mass protest, and who will lead that charge.

In *Pacted Democracy in the Middle East* you stress the importance of examining politics before theology when analysing democratisation in MENA. What do you mean by this and why is it necessary?

Religion will always remain part of the social landscape of the Middle East, because for many people it constitutes an irreducible foundation of their personal and communal identities. Yet debates over how religion should be interpreted to favour certain political institutions are endless, and they do not result in consensus. This becomes prevalent especially during political transitions, where religious and political authorities both claim to speak on behalf of the other. My argument is that rather than entrap ourselves in these open-ended battles about interpretation, which are theological matters, we should focus on the pragmatic needs of government. Once there is a basic agreement about government, then both religious and political actors will logically move forward and shift their theological understandings to accommodate these emerging political institutions.

In the book you pose a new theory for how democracy can materialise in the MENA region—through pacting. What is pacted democratisation and why do you view it as the most conducive way to achieving democracy in the MENA region?

My theory of pacting draws upon past experiences of democratization in deeply divided societies, such as the ideologically polarized countries of Latin America during the 1980s. Today, divisions over religious identity and disagreement about Islamic prescriptions have introduced feckless conflict in many Middle East countries. Indeed, struggles to monopolize Islam have not only animated social movements like Islamists, but also bolstered the strategies of many authoritarian regimes to maintain control.

Pacting introduces another possibility. Careful bargains between secularist and Islamist groups can force political actors who initially want to eliminate the other to instead learn practices of mutual toleration. The goal is practical, namely to avoid collective annihilation through open conflict by extracting some basic guarantees, such as the constitutional allowance that all parties can participate in elections so long as they do not practice violence and uphold the rule of law. Thus, pacting helps to refocus the energies of all political forces onto the difficult task of building democracy following the end of authoritarian rule. It also provides the promise of universal participation in politics.

Your book outlines Tunisia as an example of successful pacting, but under the current rule of Kais Saeid, it has fallen prey to authoritarianism. Are pacted democracies in the MENA region truly strong enough to resist elements of populism/the ancien regime?

This remains an open question. Pacting is a recipe for crafting a tentative democracy through elections following a revolutionary break from authoritarianism. It is a strategy of transition. It is not a formula for long-term survival, because that requires a different strategy of democratic consolidation. Democracies need many things to consolidate, among them an economic agenda, civic engagement, responsive institutions, and government transparency. Sadly, populism has a way of exploiting these weaknesses. It does not rejuvenate the old authoritarian system, but rather ushers in a new type of autocratic rule. Over the past decade, this has threatened even those democracies we once called consolidated, from the United States to Brazil, Hungary, and the Philippines.

Do you believe that this theory of pacted democratisation addresses new cases of ongoing or potential transitions in the MENA region?

This theory can apply to many cases of potential transition in our region, because some basic conditions of pacting apply broadly. There is deep ideological division between secularists and Islamists, and neither can fully eliminate the other during a transition from authoritarian rule. Moreover, the mode of change in the Middle East tends to be sudden, mass-based, and revolutionary, as we saw in the Arab Spring and again during its 2018-19 aftershocks. This means that there will be an institutional vacuum of authority after autocracies collapse, and the secularist-Islamist divide will fill that space. At the same time, the *ancien regime* never truly leaves, it merely reconstitutes itself. Pacting provides one way to sidestep an inexorable struggle for power between deeply entrenched rival forces.

In a recent talk, you refer to how the international community did not praise Tunisia enough during its successful pacting period. Has this in any way contributed to Tunisia's current descent into authoritarianism?

The international community played a palpable, but by no means primary, role in contributing to Tunisian backsliding. We must address this factor but not exaggerate it. After the Arab Spring, the West rightly celebrated the creation of electoral democracy in Tunisia. However, the same actors, including multilateral donors as well as Western governments, also ignored the growing problems of corruption and inequality. There was a sense of complicity that prevailed. Today, we must remember that the Tunisian scene is primarily a domestic struggle, because that is how it has always been. When democracy returns, it will be through the passionate work of Tunisian civil society and citizenry. The West can certainly support and encourage such grassroots efforts, but the hard work rests with Tunisians themselves.

You have highlighted the need to revise the West's security assistance to the MENA region. What role would a revised Western security assistance play in facilitating pacted democratisation in the MENA region?

My new edited volume on security assistance provides a critical perspective on this matter. We are resigned to the fact that Western governments, particularly the United States, are committed to providing enormous volumes of military aid that bolster the armed forces and security institutions of many Middle East countries. A revised approach would make three important concessions. First, this security assistance carries moral hazard, because it strengthens the very authoritarian institutions that are vulnerable to popular uprisings and mass frustration. Second, security assistance can be tied to more enlightened goals, such as political reforms or democratic transparency. It does not have to be unconditional. Third, security assistance engenders relationships of long-term dependence. Military institutions and security forces in these recipient states become incapable of operating without Western support, which calls into question the strategic purposes of this aid. In essence, we need Western policymakers to recognize that their conventional geopolitical imperative to give security assistance generates serious domestic, moral, and institutional consequences on the ground.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Do not hesitate to learn and incorporate knowledge from beyond the discipline. Interdisciplinary work is immensely vital in understanding how complex problems, particularly in the Middle East, persist. Some of the best IR work in this region over the past decade has borrowed heavily from other fields, such as religion, sociology, anthropology, history, and educational studies.