



# Tocqueville in Arabia: Dilemmas in a Democratic Age

*Joshua Mitchell*

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The Arab Spring, with its calls for sweeping political change, marked the most profound popular uprising in the Middle East for generations. But if the nascent democracies born of these protests are to succeed in the absence of a strong democratic tradition, their success will depend in part on an understanding of how Middle Easterners view themselves, their allegiances to family and religion, and their relationship with the wider world in which they are increasingly integrated.

Many of these same questions were raised by Alexis de Tocqueville during his 1831 tour of America, itself then a rising democracy. Joshua Mitchell spent years teaching Tocqueville's classic account, *Democracy in America*, in America and the Arab Gulf and, with *Tocqueville in Arabia*, he offers a profound personal take. One of the reasons for the book's widespread popularity in the region is that its commentary on the challenges of democracy and the seemingly contradictory concepts of equality and individuality continue to speak to current debates. While Mitchell's American students tended to value the individualism of commercial self-interest, his Middle Eastern students had grave doubts about individualism and a deep suspicion for capitalism, which they saw as risking the destruction of long-held loyalties and obligations. When asked about suffering, American students answered in psychological or sociological terms, while Middle Eastern students understood it in terms of religion. Mitchell describes modern democratic man as becoming what Tocqueville predicted: a "distinct kind of humanity" that would be increasingly isolated and alone. Whatever their differences, students in both worlds were grappling with a sense of disconnectedness that social media does little to remedy.

We live in a time rife with mutual misunderstandings between America and the Middle East, and *Tocqueville in Arabia* offers a guide to the present, troubled times, leavened by the author's hopes about the future.

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