

Fifth Edition

POLITICS AND
CHANGE
IN THE
MIDDLE EAST

*Sources of Conflict
and Accommodation*



Roy R. Andersen
Robert F. Seibert
Jon G. Wagner

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All of Knox College



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Preface

This book has grown out of the authors' conviction that a proper understanding of present events in the Middle East requires a knowledge of the cultural, social, and economic, as well as the political, background of these events. It is, more specifically, an outgrowth of the authors' attempts to develop an undergraduate course sequence aimed at such understanding. We found that despite the abundance of excellent scholarship on the Middle East, there was a paucity of works that brought together the diverse disciplinary perspectives in a way suitable to our pedagogic aims. It is our belief that this book, with its combination of historical and contemporary materials and its integrated perspective, provides something of value that is not elsewhere available to the undergraduate student or the educator.

Many profound changes have occurred since the original publication of this book. As we published our first edition in 1982, the first signs were evident of the inevitable decline of the bipolar international system, a system in which the overarching conflict between the United States and the U.S.S.R. gave substance and meaning to a wide range of international interactions. Now, as we begin the work on revision for our Fifth Edition, the U.S.S.R. no longer exists, replaced by a loose confederation of states, autonomous areas, and dependencies that is only a shadow of the old order; and that now must compete for power and influence with its former allies in the Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Kazakhstan, as well as its old enemies in the West. It has been necessary to incorporate these new realities into our analysis of governments and politics in the Middle East. But the long-term consequences of these changes are not yet clear; they are, in fact, in the process of evolution. The new Russia is not the powerhouse that the old U.S.S.R. was reputed to be, but Russia still sees a role for itself in the Middle East; and regaining an element of its dominance in the areas of Central Asia is an emergent theme in its domestic politics, yet another example of the "domesticization of international politics and the internationalization of the domestic."

Changes in the Middle East itself have also been drastic. OPEC, for instance, was in its robust maturity as we began our initial work, a dominant player in the international energy system, capable of ostensible control of both supply and price of

petroleum; and indeed it can be demonstrated that as Middle Eastern leaders “played the petroleum card” they were able to extract concessions from east and west. But by 1997, OPEC was not nearly the dominant influence it had been, its influence diluted by a combination of new, non-OPEC sources of petroleum, new technology squeezing new life and profits out of older fields, modest conservation measures, and a softening of international demand as the world economy cooled down. The oil-rich monarchies of the Middle East are still rich, it is true, but they now live in an age of economic constraints in which important choices must be made, economically and politically. The cushion upon which they have relied for two decades has dramatically thinned.

If ever there was an issue or conflict considered architectonic in the Middle East, it was surely the Arab-Israeli conflict. Many regional issues and prospects were held hostage to this seemingly intractable problem. Parties directly involved in the conflict—Israel and the PLO—seemed inexorably headed in opposite directions. Even moderate Israelis seriously considered the merits of “transfer,” a euphemism for the coercive expulsion of all Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank; and many Palestinians committed themselves to violent confrontation with Israel, joining and working within a range of parties and groups dedicated to the destruction of Israel. Even the heavy-handed intervention of the United States failed to break the emotional and political deadlock between Israeli and Palestinian.

Imagine our collective surprise, then, in the spring of 1993, when a combination of Norway and independent international nongovernmental organizations succeeded where the combined influence of the “great powers” of the world had failed in establishing a framework for negotiating a lasting peace. The signing of the accords negotiated at Oslo registered not just the willingness of two former adversaries to seek some future-negotiated solution to their self-destructive conflict, but also the relative decline of the superpowers and their ability to dictate international outcomes. That said, the negotiations in Oslo (I and II) only began a process—a process characterized by ambiguity, negotiation, trial and error, and missed or extended deadlines. Put another way, the emerging “Palestinian Authority” is an act in progress, not something cut and dried.

Other, system-level changes should be acknowledged as well. The proliferation of satellite channels, new personal communication systems, and the geometric expansion of the Internet and access to it have begun to deliver on the promise of a truly global system of communication. These changes may have direct political consequences. The small but serious expatriate challenge to the Saudi royal family, for example, distributes its messages on the Internet, located in a home page originating in London. It is significant that among the countries most interested in controlling the information on the Net or access to it are China, the United States, and Germany—three of the most powerful countries in the world.

Sadly, our work has also been bracketed in time by the assassination of two key Middle Eastern leaders: Anwar Sadat in Egypt in 1979 and Itzhak Rabin in Israel in 1995. Both leaders were assassinated by extremist members of their own polities, and both had personally transcended the history of their previous careers in order to explore the possibilities of peace. They both succumbed to the violence engendered by a rising tide of religiously motivated political extremism, a tide evident not just in the Middle East, but truly global in scale. Non-Middle Eastern referents could include

the Oklahoma City bombing in the United States, the release of poison gas in the subway of Japan, and the reemergent political violence in England and Ireland; the list could go on and on.

The good news is that the religious communities involved in systematic political violence appear to be relatively small and not representative of their religious roots. There are growing movements of moderation and tolerance in the mainstream communities of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that now strive to offset the influence of their extremist co-religionists. It is instructive that in the aftermath of both Sadat's and Rabin's assassination, the immediate effect was to reinforce the resolve of their successors to continue the search for peace. We have continued to incorporate discussions of religion and politics in this new edition.

These events have necessitated substantial revisions in the text. In some cases the changes amounted to a straightforward updating. In others, revisions were made so as to give a more thorough background to emerging issues. The chapters on economics and contemporary international relations (The Economic Setting; The Middle East and the Changing International Order) have been updated and considerably rewritten. There is one completely new chapter, Turning Points. The country profiles have been updated and are now presented in alphabetical rather than regional order. Most significantly, the book continues to be predicated on the value of using a multidisciplinary approach within a conflict and accommodation format.

We have directed our writing to an undergraduate audience not specifically acquainted with the Middle East. In addition, we have made every effort to avoid disciplinary jargon, arcane theoretical concepts, or other devices that would necessitate a sophisticated background in any of the social sciences. This is not to say that we do not introduce any special concepts or terms, but we do so only as necessary, and we do it as painlessly as possible.

One of the characteristic problems in writing about another culture involves the use of language. The words used by Arabs, Turks, or Persians to describe institutions and concepts fundamental to their civilization usually have no direct equivalent in English. One is faced with the dilemma of whether to translate them (which necessarily introduces our own cultural bias), or to use "native" terms (which places on the reader the burden of learning a new vocabulary). Added to this problem is the more technical matter of how to transliterate Arabic or other languages into the medium of the English alphabet. Our solution has been one of compromise; we have used foreign words when there is no English equivalent or when the nearest English equivalent would be awkward or misleading. Despite our efforts to minimize foreign words, the text has unavoidably made use of a number of them—especially Arabic terms. All these are explained in the text, and whenever possible the explanation accompanies the first appearance of a term, which is indicated by the use of *italics*. As an extra aid to the student we have also included these terms in a glossary. The terms explained in the glossary are in **boldface** type the first time they appear in the text. As for the spelling of Arabic and other foreign words, we have omitted the diacritical marks that scholars use to render their transliterations technically correct. We do so on the assumption that the pronunciation of the limited number of terms we use can, for the reader's purposes, be determined without these marks. Nearly all Arabic terms appear in several different English forms in the literature; we have tried to hold to those forms that reflect the most frequent current usage among informed scholars who

write for a general audience. In personal names especially, we have often departed from the technically correct forms and employed instead the forms used in English for news reportage and popular historical writing.

One further matter that deserves mention here is the definition of the Middle East itself. The term *Middle East* raises some problems, for it originates in recent Western military usage and utilizes present national boundaries that cut across historically significant cultural and geographic divisions. Furthermore, the reference to the region as part of the "East" reveals a European bias; from the larger perspective of the whole civilized area stretching from Western Europe to East Asia, the so-called Middle East is located somewhat toward the West and has close cultural ties with the Mediterranean region as a whole. Despite these problems, we shall follow the (more or less) established convention and define the Middle East as the region bounded on the northwest by Turkey, on the southwest by Egypt, on the southeast by the Arabian peninsula, and on the northeast by Iran. At the same time, it must be remembered that this division is somewhat arbitrary, and that bordering regions like Afghanistan, the Sudan, and North Africa have much in common with their "Middle Eastern" neighbors. For this reason, we shall include them in our discussions whenever appropriate.

The authorship of this book is genuinely a joint affair; there is no "senior" author. The order of our names on the list was randomly chosen. One of the authors is an economist with a long-standing interest in economic development, one is a political scientist specializing in political development in the Third World, and the third is a cultural anthropologist specializing in religion and culture change. Each chapter was largely the work of a single author, but each reflects a dialogue that began long before the book was conceived and has continued throughout its preparation and revision.

We cannot hope to name all the persons and institutions that have made important contributions to this writing. We wish to thank Knox College for its material and moral support, and particularly for maintaining an atmosphere that nourishes interdisciplinary collaboration and teaching. We are indebted to the United States Office of Education, which made it possible for us to observe firsthand the phenomena of social and political change in two Muslim countries, Egypt and Malaysia, during 1976 and 1977. We also thank Dr. John Duke Anthony, founder, director, and driving force of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, under whose sponsorship we have collectively traveled to Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the U.A.E., and Israel and the Palestinian territories it occupies. There are scores of individuals in each of these countries who gave generously their precious time and considerable talents in order that we could better appreciate some nuances of highly complex situations. We also owe thanks to Professor John Woods and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago. As always, the staff at Prentice Hall have been supportive and professional. Finally, we thank our students at Knox, whose interest in the Middle East, energy, and enthusiasm gives us continued motivation for this work.

Above all, we take this opportunity to express our appreciation to our wives and children for suffering bravely through what is, as every author knows, the seemingly endless task of transforming a set of ideas into a finished book.

Roy R. Andersen
Robert F. Seibert
Jon G. Wagner

Introduction

Events in the Middle East have captured worldwide attention since the 1970s. Hefty increases in petroleum prices brought about by the efforts of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the spectacular rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Iran-Iraq war, and conflicts in Lebanon, the West Bank, and the Persian (Arabian) Gulf have riveted the attention of both the regional actors and the world as a whole. Yet only a couple of decades earlier many outside the region saw the problems of the Middle East as largely local affairs that rarely affected the world political arena. Today, the Middle East is properly regarded as crucial to world events, and it will continue to be so regarded in the foreseeable future.

The Middle East's geographic position alone, at the junction of Africa, Asia, and Europe, is ample reason for it to command the world's attention. A sign in the Cairo airport proclaims it the "Crossroads of the World," a slogan that rings true for several reasons. Three great monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—arose from the same society and culture; the Western and Muslim intellectual heritages have much more in common than is generally recognized. Although some major strands of Western thought can be traced to Greece, much Greek philosophy and science were preserved and transmitted to the West through the writings of Muslim scholars. In fact, the Middle East served as a repository of Greek thought while Europe languished in the Dark Ages. Also during this time, a great intellectual and cultural florescence occurred in the Islamic world. The development of algebra (in Arabic, *al-jabr*), fundamental advances in the sciences of optics and medicine, and many other intellectual achievements originated in the Middle East. Furthermore, concepts from the Far East were melded into Middle Eastern intellectual and cultural patterns. "Arabic" numerals, the decimal system, and the use of zero—all brought to the Middle East from India—paved the way for profound advances in quantitative thinking. The role of the Middle East in trade and conquest, no less than its intellectual activity, made it a crossroads in every way. The Middle East is not a desert devoid of high culture and rich history; the religion of its peoples is not characterized by wild-eyed fanaticism. The Middle East should not be viewed as an exotic area of intellectual inquiry, but rather as integral to our understanding of the world.

A serious study of the relationship of the Middle East to the rest of the world must introduce a broad array of “facts,” assumptions, hypotheses, and theories—which might threaten to overwhelm the beginning student. And, although Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon, and other Middle Eastern states share a common heritage, particular historic, geographic, and economic influences have produced substantial regional diversity. Thus the Middle East cannot be viewed as a monolithic entity; its constituent regions and entities must be studied carefully in order to identify points of commonality and divergence. The welter of information generated by these complexities can create more confusion than understanding, more tedium than excitement. We have therefore selected two themes—conflict (and its resolution) and social change—to make the task more manageable for the beginning student. Although we focus on political systems in the Middle East, we carry our themes across disciplinary lines into other social sciences. We have not, however, attempted a systematic coverage of Islamic art, literature, science, and theology, even though such coverage would indeed lend richness and subtlety to the topics covered in the text. We encourage the student to explore these topics.

POLITICS AND CONFLICT

The first theme centers on the definition of politics employed: the study of conflicts between groups of people and how those conflicts are resolved in human institutions. Conflict is present in all societies and is caused by competing demands for limited resources. The demand for resources embraces a wide variety of valued things, but may include ordinary things such as money, land, and water, or more abstract things such as deference, prestige, or even claims on cultural and religious symbols of legitimacy. The propensity of human beings to demand such things in greater quantity than the supply allows leads to conflict over distribution or consumption. When formal organizations make socially binding decisions regarding such things, they are engaging in the political resolution of social conflict. To sum up, *conflict* arises out of the inevitable competition for scarce resources; *politics* involves the resolution of these conflicts through the formal and informal processes and institutions that constitute government. We consequently equate politics with the formation and resolution of conflict in social life. Although there are many alternate definitions of politics that could be employed, the one given here is widely used and fits into the major plan of this book.

Conflict and conflict resolution occur at various levels of social organization. For example, conflict over water resources can take place at the local level (which fields are to receive how much water?), or at the regional level (should a dam be constructed in region A or region B?), or at the national level (should a country rely on its existing water sources or explore the feasibility of desalination of ocean water?). Although all of these decisions involve the provision and allocation of scarce resources, the people, institutions, and style of decision making will vary from one level to another. Conflict resolution involving personal discussion among those affected is more likely to occur at the local level than at the regional or national level. The political processes employed depend on the level and arena of conflict.

In this text, we discuss political conflict in terms of the applicable arenas. For

example, in a discussion of the elite structure of a given government, we distinguish between the qualities and styles of national and local elites. This is a convenient way of analyzing a nation's political system. However, no nation consists of neatly layered conflict arenas; any given arena interacts with other arenas that are potentially higher, lower, or equal in level. The arenas of conflict in a nation resemble the composition of a multicolored marble cake in which various colors and flavors dip and swirl irregularly.

As an example, the complex interaction of arenas can be seen in the decisions that led to the construction and operation of the Aswan High Dam in Egypt. Egypt is, as Herodotus said more than 2,000 years ago, the "gift of the Nile." Almost all its arable land lies in the Nile Valley and Delta. Over thousands of years the cultivators of the land have adapted their agricultural techniques and timing to the annual flooding of the river. Regulating the flow of the Nile through the construction of a large dam, it was theorized, would free the farmers from dependence on the caprice of the river, minimize flood damage, and maximize agricultural production.

However, the project brought to light many unanticipated conflicts—some of which had been simmering below the surface of day-to-day events, and some of which were created by the construction and operation of the dam. The major themes of conflict were as follows: (1) The financing and construction of the dam involved superpower interests: The United States had first agreed to finance the project, but backed out of the agreement; the U.S.S.R. then stepped in to fill the breach. (2) The determination of water rights between Egypt and the Sudan had to be resolved, since the lake formed by the dam crossed the border dividing the two countries. (3) Thousands of families had to be relocated from the lake site into existing or new villages and towns. (4) A system for allocating irrigation water to Nile Delta farmers had to be developed. (5) Drainage problems induced by the operation of the dam required individual, village, provincial, national, and finally World Bank intervention. The relationships among various groups involved had to be reworked, sometimes drastically. The Aswan High Dam was—and is—the focal point of conflict in several arenas; it is an example of the tendency for solutions in one arena to generate new problems in another, in a complex cycle of cause and effect.

APPROACHES TO SOCIAL CHANGE

Human social life is changing with increasing speed. Certain trends set in motion only a few centuries ago have accelerated and spread until they have profoundly affected most of the world's societies and have drawn nations into an unprecedented degree of interdependence. Westerners, who have benefited in particular from many of these changes, sometimes take them for granted as part of the natural course of human "progress," without much attempt at a deeper critical understanding. Even the social sciences may be subtly influenced by ethnocentric assumptions. For the Western reader to grasp the essence of these changes and to understand their causes without falling into the trap of cultural chauvinism (or its negative counterpart, cultural self-deprecation) is no easy task.

Many Westerners naively assume that the West has been in the forefront of cultural development for thousands of years, a view that is enhanced by grafting European history onto that of the Greeks while placing the Middle East in the vague

category of “Oriental” or “Asian” cultures. But, by any objective standards, Western Europe could not be called a leader in world cultural development until very late in history. Even after the Renaissance, Europe was on no more than an equal footing with the older centers of civilization, and it was only in the eighteenth century that it decisively surpassed the Middle East in technology and commercial power.

What is the nature of the unique change that originated in Western society and subsequently influenced the emerging world order, and why did it occur in Europe rather than the older centers of civilization? Marshall G. S. Hodgson, in his remarkably insightful work, *The Venture of Islam*, has characterized this change as one toward “technicalization.”¹ A technicalized society is one in which the interplay of specialized technical considerations tends to take precedence over aesthetic, traditional, interpersonal, religious, or other nontechnical concerns—in short, a society structured by the demands of specialized technical efficiency. This is not to imply that nontechnicalistic societies have no interest in technical efficiency or that technicalistic societies care for nothing else, but only that the unprecedented emphasis on specialized technical considerations has played a key role in the development of modern cultures. The process of technicalization and its ramifications can be seen as central to many of the cultural changes that are taking place in contemporary countries, from the poorest to the most affluent. Some of these changes tend to occur repeatedly in different countries because they are directly related to the process of technicalization; others, such as style of clothing or taste in entertainment, are communicated as part of a growing international cosmopolitan culture. Some changes are predictable and others are not, and some may be fundamental to the technicalization process while others are only incidental to it.

Perhaps the most fundamental elements are economic and technological in nature. The rise of technicalism in Europe was accompanied by certain changes that still seem inseparable from it, and central among these is the institutionalization of technical innovation. The ability to adopt efficient technical innovations was the key to success among the competing private business enterprises of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, and for that reason traditional European social forces that impeded free scientific inquiry gradually gave way before a cultural outlook that took for granted continuous inquiry and innovation. Such an outlook has had far-reaching consequences in noneconomic realms, but its effect on the techno-economic order has been most immediate. It has led to a rapid development of industrial production, the use of fossil fuels, complex machines, standardized mass production, a highly specialized division of labor and knowledge, and a substantial reinvestment of profits in the machinery of production. This pattern of production has been accompanied by a growth of regional interdependence, so that even nonindustrialized regions tend to become part of a growing network for the exchange of raw materials and manufactured items. This integration may or may not occur on such terms as to facilitate an increase in economic independence and material well-being for a given society; there is nothing in the creation of a world economic system that assures justice, equality, or a universal advance in well-being.

In addition to its material aspects, the technicalizing trend has had many social

¹ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 186–196.

and cultural consequences. In society generally, there has been a greater tendency for roles and social status to be achieved rather than ascribed on the basis of gender, age, kinship, or circumstances of birth. The criterion of technical efficiency is applied in politics, where technical competence gradually displaces the more traditional criteria for choosing leaders, while the public becomes increasingly informed and competent in political matters. Mass communication has brought about the possibility of mass public support for political leaders and programs, thus ushering in a new era of participatory politics (or, all too often, active repression of burgeoning popular movements). The institutionalization of change, together with the notion of holding customs and institutions accountable to criteria of technical efficiency, also brings about new attitudes toward societal rules, which are less likely to be seen as absolute and eternal. And, finally, increased communication and interdependence have helped to create a much more cosmopolitan outlook in which an increasing number of people see themselves, if not as "citizens" of the whole world, at least as actors in it.

The historical reasons for the technicalization of the West are difficult to unravel, but they may include some geographical and ecological components. In fact, some of the ecological conditions that retarded European civilization in earlier history may have aided its more recent rise. Among the most significant factors in the rise of technicalism in the West were the unprecedented importance of capital reinvestment and technological innovation, both of which were being built into the commercial institutions of eighteenth-century Europe. It is possible that entrepreneurial capitalism, which supported this competition for technical efficiency, was discouraged in the older civilizations where irrigation-based agriculture promoted the consolidation of a more centralized governmental control. Europe, by contrast, had an economy based on rainfall agriculture that provided less of a basis for centralized control of the economy, and monarchs and central bureaucracies were therefore less able to thwart and exploit would-be capitalists. The West's economic potential in the eighteenth century may have been bolstered by the fact that it, unlike the land-depleted Middle East, still had virgin countryside into which agricultural production could expand. Whatever the historical reasons for the priority of Europe in making the transition, the West's institutionalization of technical efficiency and technological innovation has done much to determine not only the character of the West itself but of the world order as well.

The West did not set out to conquer the world; rather, each European nation sought to extend its political and economic interests and to protect them, not only from local threats but from other European powers as well. Whatever their nationality, Europeans invariably saw themselves as a progressive people ruling and tutoring the backward segments of humankind, and they were able to support this attitude with a technically efficient military force. Sometimes European domination took the form of direct occupation and political rule; but even when it did not, the pattern of domination remained similar. The European powers intervened as necessary to ensure that local governments kept sufficient order to protect European interests, but not enough power to pose any challenge to European hegemony. Typically, the economic production of the dominated countries was structured to provide a limited range of raw materials most needed by the dominant power.

In some respects, European cultural domination was just as far-reaching as its political, military, and economic domination. Middle Easterners were classified along with the various Asian peoples as "Orientals," and it was widely held that such

people were given to inscrutable peculiarities of thought, blind obedience to tradition, and insensitivity to suffering. Even Middle Eastern nationalism has sometimes been influenced by Western biases in subtle ways; for example, many Middle Easterners have tacitly accepted the classification of themselves as "Orientals," a category that has little meaning except as an expression of European ethnocentrism.

One of the lingering and pervasive effects of Western ethnocentrism is the tendency to confuse "progress" with Westernization, and to hold up middle-class Europe and America as a universal model of "modernity." It is intellectually and morally indefensible to assume that everything non-Western is necessarily backward, especially when much of Western culture comes from a time when Western civilization was less developed than that of the Middle and Far East. Yet it is often tempting, even for the non-Westerner, to equate change with Westernization. The political and economic dominance of the West during the past few centuries has made Westernization a companion of most other changes, so that Westerners and non-Westerners alike sometimes find different types of changes difficult to distinguish from Westernization.

In keeping with the prejudice that Western society sets the course for universal human progress, some Westerners—including certain social theorists—have pictured non-Western societies as stagnant and mired in an unreflective obedience to "tradition." A theoretical view widely accepted a decade or two ago, for example, contrasted the purportedly inflexible and unimaginative conservatism of the "traditional" Middle Easterner with the open-minded, resourceful, optimistic, and empathetic outlook of the "modernized" person. According to this view, the key to progress and affluence in the Third World is a fundamental change in psychological outlook that comes from exposure to more liberated ways of thinking that originate—of course—in the West. Critics of this now outdated view have pointed out, with some justice, that it is more self-congratulatory than illuminating. It ignores the great diversity of outlooks that exist within the "traditional" world and the particular historical conditions that have given rise to them. It also overlooks the possibility that cultural attitudes may be understandable responses to political, economic, or ecological realities that cannot be waved away by a change in attitude—realities that include the Western presence itself.

Perhaps the chief oversight of the "modernization" theory, in the context of this book, is its failure to appreciate the political dimensions of human choice in "traditional" settings. Conflict, political strategy, and calculated choice are found in all human societies, even when they result in the reproduction of a relatively stable system—and few if any societies are ever completely stable. Although the Western observer may be tempted by the romantic notion that every "exotic" custom or idea dates from time immemorial, a closer look at cultural history (especially that of the Middle East) reveals a continuous state of flux. The origin and spread of Islam is one good example of the speed and magnitude of change, even in basic beliefs, that can occur in a traditional society. While people everywhere are inclined to accept the beliefs and perspectives with which they were reared, they are everywhere capable of revising and criticizing these traditions when they no longer seem to fill their needs.

While it is true that a "modern" or technicalized setting may present people with a greater range of possibilities than was previously known, it is important not to underestimate the degree to which rational calculation enters into decision making even when "traditional" values are invoked. Indeed, some of the supposed differ-

ences between “traditional” and “modern” outlooks may be largely a matter of rhetorical style. For example, a political leader planning the invasion of a neighboring country may seek to justify it in a variety of ways: He may utilize a rationalistic rhetoric that stresses its benefits (“This invasion will bring peace, security, and good government to all concerned”); he may use a traditionalistic rhetoric that looks to the authority of the past (“These people have always been our subjects”); or he may use religious rhetoric (“God will look kindly on us for subduing the infidel”). All these styles of rhetoric have been used throughout history, but the rationalistic style is relatively fashionable in technicalized societies. The use of such rhetoric does not in itself make one’s actions particularly reasonable, any more than the use of a religious rhetoric means that one’s actions are divinely guided, or a traditionalist rhetoric proves that a given practice is genuinely traditional. It is a mistake, then, to conclude simply from these differences in public rhetoric that one society’s motives and actions are in fact more rational than another’s.

The perspective of distance almost always makes other cultures look flat, arbitrary, and deterministic compared with our own. Whether we are getting married or getting dressed in the morning, we see our own actions as guided by reason, filled with subtle meaning, and tempered by personal freedom. The corresponding behavior in another culture seems to us simple, stereotyped, and unreflective. “We” put on neckties because we think, and “they” put on turbans because they don’t—or so it seems. Yet, close studies of traditional peoples have shown them to be more critically aware of circumstances and choices than is commonly assumed. Quite often, behavior that appears motivated by blind conservatism turns out instead to be based on a realistic assessment of the alternatives; thus many people are quite capable of grasping the significance of changing circumstances and are able to adapt to them accordingly. Such choices, however, must always be made within the framework of existing institutions and guided by existing values and assumptions about the nature and purpose of human existence. These values and assumptions are deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of a people; this is as true of the West as it is of the Middle East, and it helps account for the continuing role of religion in both settings. For that reason we have adopted two basic strategies in presenting the material. First, we shall heavily emphasize the historical forces that have shaped the Middle East. To understand what the Middle East is and what it might be requires that one know what it was. The chapters dealing with the history of past centuries, therefore, are best viewed as part of the present landscape and not as a separate story. Second, since the politics of the Middle East are woven together with general social and economic forces, a multidisciplinary approach had been adopted, an approach facilitated by the diversity of the authors’ academic training in political science, economics, and cultural anthropology.

Political affairs in the Middle East are treated here as the product of the interaction among social organization, secular values, religion, and the control and allocation of authority and resources at all levels. While the variables must sometimes be isolated for analysis, to remove them permanently from their context is to invite misunderstanding.

Contents

Preface	ix
----------------	-----------

Introduction	xiii
---------------------	-------------

Politics and Conflict,	xiv
Approaches to Social Change,	xv

1

Traditional Cultures of the Middle East: The Cradle of Civilization and Politics	1
---	----------

Foundations of Social Diversity,	3
Unity in Diversity,	9

2

The Foundations of Islam	13
---------------------------------	-----------

Central Beliefs of Islam,	14
Pre-Islamic Arab Ethics,	16
The Social Setting of Mecca,	18
Muhammad's Ministry,	21
Five Popular Misconceptions About Islam,	27
Conclusion,	31

3

The Political Legacy of Islam, A.D. 632–1800 32

- The Establishment of the Islamic State, 33
- The Golden Age of the Caliphate, 35
- Mongol Destruction and the Rebirth of Empire, 38
- Growth and Decline in the Islamic State, 41
- Legitimacy in Government, 42
- The Sharia Law, 44
- The Shia, 45
- Sufism, 46
- Islam and Radical Politics, 47
- Diversity in Islamic Political Thought, 50

4

Western Imperialism, 1800–1914 52

- Setting the Stage, 53
- The Ottomans, 54
- Egypt, 57
- The Levant, 60
- The Arabian Peninsula, 60
- Iran, 62
- Conclusion, 66

5

The Rise of the State System, 1914–1950 67

- The McMahon-Husein Correspondence, 68
- The Mandates, 71
- Egypt, 74
- Saudi Arabia, 77
- Turkey and Iran, 78
- From Palestine to Israel, 80
- Conclusion, 84

6

The Drive for Self-Determination 86

- The New Arab Nationalism, 87
- Petroleum and the Gulf, 99
- Israel, 107
- The Palestinians and the 1988 Uprising, 119
- Conclusion, 125

7

Turning Points 127

- Arab Nationalism, 128
- From Oslo to Jerusalem, 136
- Conclusion, 142

8

The Politics of Religion, Culture, and Social Life 143

- The Politics of Culture, 144
- The Contemporary Politics of Islam, 147
- Turkey: Radical Westernization and the Durability of Islam, 150
- Egypt: The Labyrinth of Possibilities, 153
- Saudi Arabia: An Islamic Camelot? 158
- Iran and the Islamic Republic, 162
- Sexual Politics, 167
- Conclusion, 174

9

Political Elites 175

- Traditional, Transitional, and Technically Modernizing Elites, 178
- Conclusion, 201

10

Political Leadership in the Contemporary Middle East 202

- Traditional Leadership, 202
- Charismatic Leadership, 207
- Modern Bureaucratic Leadership, 211
- Consequences of Leadership Styles, 214
- Traditional States, 214
- Modern Bureaucratic States, 216
- Charismatic Rule, 222
- Conclusion, 225

11

The Economic Setting 227

- The Economic Record, 229
- Organization of Economic Activity, 231