

## Chapter 1

### Culture and Identity

Cultural issues are central to the politics of the Middle East and North Africa. As the Taliban renewed their control of Afghanistan, they lost no time in seeking to undo the cultural changes enacted in the last twenty years, especially those affecting women. The reforms undertaken in Saudi Arabia under prince Muhammad bin Salman, building on a long effort to extend education to Saudi youth of both sexes, include cultural changes that bring the country toward international norms. Iran struggles with economic and nuclear issues but always in the context of a perceived cultural conflict with the Western world. Next door Iraq struggles to get beyond the deep ethnic and sectarian divisions once fomented by authoritarian rule and then consolidated and reinforced under allied occupation. Turkey appears no closer to resolving the deep division between majority Turks and minority Kurdish populations. By insisting on a culturally defined notion of citizenship, Israel defends against the genuine integration of non-Jews even as it solidifies its control over Muslims and Christians in the West Bank and Gaza. Outside forces from Europe and the United States advance the case for democracy and human rights in the region, and by doing so trigger local resistance to what is perceived as cultural imperialism. Islamist groups in almost every Muslim-dominated country counter with appeals for cultural authenticity, all the while embracing aspects of modernization theory, itself a product of Western culture.

Rare is the government in the region that does not invoke some aspect of culture---language, religion, ethnicity, or all of them---to solidify national identity, legitimate its authority, and support its policies. Cultural identity may not be the primary cause of conflict, but it is frequently invoked as a rationale for hostility. The Sunni states on the western side of the Gulf fear Shiite Iran, its military might, its religious propaganda, and the immigration of Shiites deemed potentially subversive. Interventions in Libya since the overthrow of the old regime appear to reflect attitudes toward the

Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups deemed to be supportive of the regime in Tripoli. Iran sees itself as culturally aligned with the Asad government of Syria and Hezbollah, a political party backed by a militia with great influence next door in Lebanon. Whether Shiism is sufficient to explain the alliance is another matter; Iranian hostility toward Israel may figure in the explanation, too—a hostility often portrayed as linked to religion. Identity issues surface in just about every aspect of politics, domestic or international, in the Middle East and North Africa.

How is it that issues tied to culture and identity have become so prominent in the Middle East and North Africa? Why have so many elements of culture become politicized and what are the consequences of that politicization? Does culture matter? I will argue that governments inside and outside the region have politicized culture to enhance their influence, power and legitimacy. Cultural identities matter for many reasons but do not necessarily matter in the ways commonly imagined, as in lines such as “Arabs cannot be democrats,” or “Muslims are terrorists.” As for consequences, I will argue that the politicization of culture to reinforce national identities has also buttressed the authoritarianism common in these countries and contributed to conflict among them. Efforts to democratize, nationalize, Islamize, Arabize, feminize, or otherwise transform cultural identities have not brought unity to the region, independence from outside political interference, or the legitimacy that national governments continue to seek.

Human history is one of diversity in language, religion, and ways of life. Even if human nature is everywhere the same, culture differentiates and divides at some level. Yael Tamir writes: “Categorization is deeply grounded in human psychology—it is a necessary tool of self-definition. The term human is far too thin a mode of delineation.”<sup>1</sup> Those who have argued for the notion of civilization, as in Western civilization or Islamic civilization see cultural commonality and division at that level. European scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, working mainly from

textual materials, generalized about the Arab/Muslim world, and contrasted the civilization they described with that of enlightenment Europe, divided politically but united by history, religion, science, philosophy and artistic endeavor. For these self-identified “Orientalists,” often specialists in the languages of the Middle East and North Africa, there was a superior and an inferior civilization. Some contemporary Islamists, inspired by the Egyptian radical Sayyid Qutb<sup>2</sup> have adopted a similar stance but reversed the order of hierarchy. For them Islamic civilization is superior to all others.

The Orientalist argument for the superiority of Western civilization reflected a conviction broadly shared in Europe and United States in the past two centuries that there is a single formula for the improvement of human kind. From the Renaissance forward Europeans had reached out to discover other parts of the world, developed a scientific tradition in the face of religious resistance, derived new technologies in the wake of scientific discoveries, launched an industrial revolution that augmented general well-being even as it introduced new versions of suffering, achieved ever higher degrees of literacy as printing presses churned out millions of books and newspapers, banned slavery and made other advances in the pursuit of human liberty. The United States led the way in establishing a new form of government claiming to represent the will of the people. At almost the same moment France proclaimed itself a republic, and Great Britain, already more advanced as a nation and in its pursuit of representative government, continued to edge its way toward more democratic political arrangements. The whole of the western world appeared to be moving in a single direction. For the Orientalists, the Middle East was far behind.

Western political philosophers charted a course toward liberalism and democracy. Economists analyzed a process of capitalist industrialization. Sociologists came to speak about increasing differentiation of roles and responsibilities. Karl Marx, economist, historian and philosopher, believed class conflict would inevitably lead to the destruction of the capitalist system and lead to the establishment of Communism, a still higher stage of development. While his version

of progress differed from those of the European mainstream, he nonetheless accepted the idea that human beings were capable of learning from history to create a better world. He believed in the advancement of the human race. Those European intellectuals who studied Middle Eastern languages and religions saw themselves as champions of that advancement confronting an area still mired in illiteracy, stultified religious doctrines, handicraft economies, and political autocracy. The Orientalists portrayed the region as frozen at a lower stage of social, economic, and political development.

The publication in 1978 by Edward Said of *Orientalism* attacked the tradition of Western scholarship that was solidly anchored in this paradigm of progress and development.<sup>3</sup> For him the paradigm reflected not historical truth but cultural bias. Said deployed example after example of art, literature, and scholarship to show that the West had formulated a highly distorted view of the Orient---by which he meant the Muslim Middle East---that served to justify the domination of what was deemed an inferior culture. He linked Orientalism with imperialism, and in doing so he called into question the objectivity of Western scholarship on the Middle East and North Africa. (Among Said's subsequent books was one entitled *Culture and Imperialism*.)<sup>4</sup> Because Said was of Palestinian origin and had associated himself with the Palestinian cause, the controversy that his work provoked among scholars became entangled with the Israel-Palestine conflict. Said took issue in print and in at least one public debate with a prominent British scholar, Bernard Lewis, who had been forthright in his support of the Israeli cause and who stepped forward to defend the sort of scholarship Said was criticizing. Lewis's first book was a history of modern Turkey that praised the work of Mustapha Kemal Atatürk for putting independent, republican Turkey on a path of secularism, industrialization, and representative government.<sup>5</sup> He embraced the modernization paradigm that Said attacked. For Lewis and many of his defenders, Said became the bad boy for subverting a rich tradition of scholarship on the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> For the majority of scholars working on the Middle

East and North Africa, Said's work led to a transformation of the field and an opening toward new avenues of research.

### **Defining Culture**

With Said the question of culture became central. Is it possible for anyone born into one culture to understand another? Said posed the question. If the cultural perspective pervading the works of Western scholarship purveyed a distorted image of Arab/Muslim culture, did this not imply the existence of a Truth being willfully or inadvertently neglected? Or was Said advocating cultural relativism, as some of his critics maintained? That would have meant a claim that all observations must be considered in a cultural context and that there is no firm ground from which to assert the superiority of one culture to another. As James Clifford has observed, Said did not propose an alternative approach to the study of Islam that would avoid the cultural biases inherent in the Orientalism he criticized. There was no "real" Orient, in his view, and thereby perhaps no culture can be accurately described.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Said questioned the utility of thinking about the world as divided into cultures: "Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?"<sup>8</sup> Despite the interest in the concept of culture that he inspired, Said actually expressed reservations about the idea itself: "How does one represent another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one?"<sup>9</sup>

Some writers argue that the notion of culture is not useful. Pierre Boyer, for example, denies that there is a distinction between the natural and the cultural. He argues that culture is not "real;" the associational phenomena attributed to it can be explained by coalitional behavior which is, like all other human behavior, rewarded or sanctioned by Darwin's principle of natural selection.<sup>10</sup> He argued that Darwinian perspective represents a truth that escapes its origins in British society of the nineteenth century and in the scientific culture of Europe. Liberal universalists such as the pre-

eminent twentieth-century political philosopher, John Rawls also resist cultural interpretations. The starting point for analysis is a rational human being outside of historical or geographical context. For political theorist Francis Fukuyama, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant the “end of history” and the victory of liberal democracy.<sup>11</sup> Neo-conservatives justified the invasion of Iraq in terms of spreading democracy to the Middle East and North Africa. Elliot Abrams, a diplomat who has served the Reagan, Bush, and Trump administrations, insists that the United States should make the defense of universal human rights a high priority of its foreign policy.<sup>12</sup> Even the Obama administration, though more cautious in its liberal universalism than his predecessor, invoked the right to protect Libyan civilians when the United States joined Europeans in attacking the Qadhafi regime. For those convinced that truth is knowable and universal, culture has little relevance.

For many analysts of modern politics and society, however, the concept of multiple cultures each united in some fashion by common codes of thought and behavior is useful, even if it is as dangerous as Edward Said argued. Putting people into cultural categories necessarily distorts reality by simplifying it. Seyla Benhabib writes:

Philosophically I do not believe in the purity of cultures, or even in the possibility of identifying them as meaningfully discrete wholes. I think of cultures as complex human practices of signification and representation, of organization and attribution, which are internally riven by conflicting narratives. Cultures are formed by rough complex dialogue with other cultures.<sup>13</sup>

Benhabib’s definition avoids associating cultures with ethnic commonality or religious belief; it suggests cultures interact, overlap, and nurture internal conflict. Gerd Baumann, an anthropologist, agrees with Benhabib that culture is “not an imposition of fixed and normed identities, but a

dialogical process of making sense with and through others.”<sup>14</sup> Ben-Ami Scharfstein, an Israeli philosopher, invokes a cloud metaphor to illustrate the nature of cultures:

A cloud, which may have a clear shape on the background of the sky, cannot begin or end at a definite line or, in an absolute sense, begin or end at all. . . . In this definite indefiniteness, this simultaneous separation and merging, a cloud resembles all kinds of cultural traits and entire subcultures and cultures. Like these, it may unite symmetry with asymmetry and stimulate a more knowing analysis of complex and indefinite relationships.<sup>15</sup>

These definitions all point toward a phenomenon that draws people together into affinity groups without necessarily being defined by clear boundaries, shared meanings, physical characteristics, common language or religion, long-standing existence, or any other concrete characteristic.

Anthropologist James Clifford writes: “Culture is a deeply compromised idea I cannot yet do without.”<sup>16</sup>

Political Scientist Lisa Wedeen links culture to politics in a way that responds many of these problems and reservations. Wedeen uses “semiotic practices” as convenient handle for her definition of culture. Semiotics focuses on the ways in which signs and symbols produce meaning. Wedeen writes:

A practice-oriented cultural approach can help us explain how political identifications are established; how rhetoric and symbols not only exemplify but also can produce political compliance; why some political ideologies, policies, and self-policing strategies work better than others; what terms such as "democracy" . . . and "religion" mean to political actors who invoke or consume them and how these perceptions might affect political outcomes; and why particular material and status

interests are taken for granted, are viewed as valuable, or become available idioms for dissemination and collective action.<sup>17</sup>

Her definition puts the focus on how identities come to be constructed and maintained as both a cause of political actions and the result of them.

Unlike culture imagined at the level of civilization, a semiotic definition of culture does not presume coherence. It accords with the reality that no civilization, state, region, or community is homogenous. There may be majoritarian practices and predominant ways of thinking, but there is everywhere diversity of one sort or another. European society was not more uniform than the Ottoman Empire; Christianity was no more uniform than Islam, or vice versa. Practices that may be meaningful for a part of the population may not have the same meaning for another. Football promotes national feeling in many countries, but that does not mean that it entralls all citizens. And while baseball was once the national sport in the United States, that may no longer be the case.

Seeing culture as practices that produce meaning challenges the notion of culture as essential categories by asking how such categories emerge, persist, and diminish in importance over time. To be a part of the Jewish category in Israel is important for one's role in the society, but the meaning of that category is not stable or uniform. For some it is a more important label than "Israeli" because it connotes belief. For others, it has no significance in a state where the majority claims Jewish identity. Some Israelis who grow up in highly observant families may move into the so-called secular camp. Other labels, such as Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox, and "traditional" hide variation within each of them. Those deemed to be members of a category may take the label as an important part of their identity, while others may see this category as the creation of political forces seeking to strengthen their own positions and weaken those of others. How do identities come to have significance? How are they manufactured? How does the meaning of a category evolve in response

to changing material realities?

Culture understood as semiotic practices accommodates the notion of culture transformed into ideology. It asks not whether conceptions of culture are true or false but where they are founded, how they are promoted, and what they come to mean. Michael Barnett showed how Arab leaders constructed a pan-Arab ideology in the 1950s that acquired a meaning that none of them could afford to ignore even when the political costs were high. Of course, the principal protagonists of Arabism did not invent it out of whole cloth.<sup>18</sup> They drew on Arab history, an Arabic-language discourse that had undergone serious revival in the nineteenth century, and a situation in which failure to defeat Israel produced frustration in fragile Arab states. By building upon elements of history, and ignoring others, they created an ideology of Arabism that suggested the need for actions, such as uniting all Arabs in a single state, that none of them actually favored. While protagonists such as Gamal Abd al-Nasir ostensibly sought to unite the Arabs to fend off the West and Israel, his efforts ended up dividing the Arabs and causing him, perhaps, to provoke war with Israel in 1967. With his constructivist approach, Barnett shows how Nasir and others fashioned Arabism into a political identity of significance that was undercut by events of the 1970s and 1980s.

The concept of culture as semiotic practice is particularly important to the discussion of women in the Middle East and North Africa, which often includes broad generalizations about the influence of Islam. In fact, the power and position of women varies from one country to another and between regions and classes within a single country. Moreover, yesterday's norm has changed today, and may change again tomorrow. The practice of veiling virtually disappeared in urban areas of Turkey in the twentieth century. Now it has come back in some quarters and taken on new meanings. Creation of a new industry producing elegant "Islamic" fashion for women has become a symbol of bourgeois piety in Egypt and elsewhere. Women's participation in the work force is relatively low across the region, but the reasons for that fact may vary from place to place. There

exists everywhere in the region a discourse about women's roles, rights, and duties that suggests both the persistence of certain cultural traditions and revisions of them stimulated by economic and social change. Culture continues to influence women's roles but in different ways and to different degrees in every country. National politics affecting women's rights in the family, place in the society and role in the nation better explain the opportunities available to female citizens than broad generalizations about Islamic or Arab culture. Multiple cultural forces are in play, including those of international organizations advocating universal human rights.

### **How Culture Matters<sup>19</sup>**

This is a book about culture as a source of identity used to characterize a civilization, a society, or groups of people pursuing political ambitions. It does not provide a general account of customs, family structures, religious beliefs, eating habits, vacation travels, literary preferences, art and music, or other human behavior that might be defined as cultural. The book is about cultural identity as a political variable. In interpreting so-called primitive cultures, anthropologists generally identified spiritual practices as essential to the cultures they were observing. But religion and language do not affect politics unless some human beings attach political significance to those practices. Language, usually seen as fundamental to culture, is not a political issue unless someone takes it to be an essential element binding a group that seeks political objectives. Accounts of merchants and others in the Mediterranean basin in the medieval period seemed unfazed and unimpressed by differences of language. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, language became a key to rallying support for nationalism. The way women dress not necessarily carry a political message, but the prevalence of veiling in some Middle Eastern societies acquired political significance in the epoch of European imperialism. It retains significance in a number of countries in the present era. Religion, language, secularism, women's rights, and developmentalism all became

and remain political issues, not because they are intrinsically political but because they have come to be defined in that way. Human agency has rendered them cultural questions of political significance.

Governments politicize culture as do forces of opposition. ISIS is the most extreme example, but the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1929, advanced a politicization of Islam that continues across the region. Governments repress Islamists in the name of secularism, and Islamists repress secularists for similar reasons. Culture is power when it comes to be attached to collectivities---civilizations, nation-states, religions, languages, ethnicities, international organizations, or subnational groups. It can and has become an instrument of domination. And the dominant powers provoke their opponents into using the same cultural tools. If resistance is successful, new governments arrive in power prepared to invoke culture in imposing domestic and foreign policies, as did Islamists in Iran and Turkey. A new version of domination emerges.

### **Imperialism and Nationalism**

The concept of culture invoked to support national identity has served to facilitate authoritarian politics in the Middle East. Orientalist scholars shared a belief in the superiority of Western civilization seen as a coherent whole and the inferiority of the mainly Muslim societies of the MENA, lumped into a single entity. For Europeans this concept of contrasting civilizations served to justify their domination, colonialism, mandates, and zones of influence. For Middle Easterners who bought into the European perspective, backwardness explained their weakness and suggested that the route to recovery lay with imitating the European model of social and economic modernization. Among the first to liberate themselves from European domination, the Turks established a republic that sought to disavow its inherited identity and impose European ways. In the name of secularism, which its leaders took to be the key to modern “civilization,” republican Turkey promulgated an authorized version of Islam and repressed unauthorized religious activities.

The Europeans advanced the idea that they represented a single, universal culture of

civilization, as opposed to a single, undifferentiated Oriental culture lacking in the rationalism of modernity. Meanwhile, they also accepted and promoted an idea, cultural nationalism, that conflicted with the breadth of culture understood at the level of civilization. Language was primary to the European version of nationalism from its early articulation.<sup>20</sup> Theory held that naturally existing cultures gave rise to natural political entities in which relatively homogenous populations would enjoy citizenship. It was scarcely surprising, then---however potentially harmful to many human beings---that the makers of the new republic in the Anatolian peninsula chose to make Turkish ethnicity and Turkish language foundations of its national identity. They sought religious homogeneity by encouraging Muslims in Greece to migrate to Anatolia, and Christians in Anatolia to go to Greece. This transfer of population followed on the genocide of Armenians under the rule of Young Turks before and during the First World War, a dramatic example of ethnic cleansing that found some support in the mentalities of the era, affected as they were by the notion that cultural identification was the key to successful political arrangements.<sup>21</sup>

Nationalism as it emerged in the American and French revolutions did not presuppose cultural distinctiveness or homogeneity. Rather it meant a shift of authority from king and elites toward citizens participating in the body politic. However, nationalism as it played out in the Middle East and North Africa after World War I called first and foremost for liberation from European rule and influence, not popular sovereignty. Nationalist leaders made only half-hearted commitments to the meaningful participation of citizens. Regimes put off democratization and justified authoritarian rule by invoking what many saw as a prior and superior commitment to modernization, itself a concept laden with neo-colonial implications.

That search for national identities became pressing after World War I, when the great powers, Great Britain and France, victorious over the Ottoman Empire, sought to break up Ottoman territory into a set of states with boundaries reflecting imperial interests or the whimsy of

European statesmen. In what became Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine, the imperial powers awarded themselves mandates to prepare these geographical parcels for eventual self-determination as states where there was no distinctive cultural rationale to support nationhood. It is common to decry the decisions taken by the Europeans as irrational in terms of local sentiments and identities. Indeed, the rationality of these decisions lay with the European interest in political control of the region and in asserting the superiority of its civilization, transmitting it to Middle Easterners in the form of modern economic, social, and political arrangements. The nations that emerged lacked what the Europeans themselves believed was the essential quality of a nation: cultural homogeneity. No alternative set of borders would have achieved that objective, either.

That the region included many ethnic and religious groups was not news to anyone. The Ottoman Empire, despite defining itself as a part of the Sunni Muslim tradition, was a multicultural entity. As the empire struggled for survival, it followed European advice and decreed that all citizens were equal, an action that offended the Muslim majority and hardened the lines separating the majority from cultural minorities. Which categories of people deserved to form states? In a state such as Jordan, predominantly Arab and Muslim, what should be the status of minorities? Should categories be ignored or accommodated? The question of cultural identities became pressing in Palestine under the British mandate. Zionists evoking a common Jewish heritage began to settle Palestine in the early days of the twentieth century, encountering resistance from local Arabs, Muslims and Christians, who were not sure at that moment whether they identified primarily as Arabs, Syrians, or Palestinians. The Zionists used the development of Hebrew as a national language as well as some elements of religion to solidify their efforts to gain a state. The struggle between cultures soon became entangled with a struggle over control of territory that continues until today.

## Modernity and Authenticity

Early nationalists in the Middle East and North Africa found themselves in a cultural dilemma. As products of European-style education, they embraced “modern” ways in economy, society, and politics. They associated nationalism with the progress of democracy and equality, but they did so by opposing not just the traditionalism of the Ottoman Empire but the modernism espoused by European imperialism. For some Middle Easterners, national modernity required Europeanization and abandonment of inherited ways of living. For others, however, nationalism meant fashioning and refashioning traditional beliefs and attitudes, often in terms of reinterpreting Islamic rules and practice, to preserve distinctiveness consistent with liberalizing change. It meant rewriting history to support the existence of a Turkish “people” or an Arab “people” or an Algerian “people.”

Authenticity became a political issue. One approach common among nationalist intellectuals was to insist that practices linked to religion deemed obstructive of modernization could be discarded as long as the essence of Islam, the “true” Islam, was identified and maintained. Some suras of the Quran were more important than others, and the sayings of the Prophet (the hadith literature) were not to be taken as seriously as the Quran. Nationalists would come to accept inclusion in their new European-inspired law codes of elements taken from the Sharia tradition of jurisprudence. The revival and updating of classical Arabic and its use in printed books and newspapers helped spark Arab nationalism and at the same time, for the linkage of the classical with the Quran, heightened the importance of religious tradition and exposed it to the commentary and critique of amateurs, not just of religious professionals. Could nationalists mold a universal religion into a pillar of particularism without compromising their own modernizing impulses? That question drove the quest for the “authentic” Islam.

The fundamental cultural question affecting every country in the region, and not just those emerging from the machinations of Europeans after WWI, is one associated with the developmental model for economic, social, and political change, a model defended in terms of science and reason. Every national government in the region has attached itself in some measure to that model. Sometimes the commitment is partial, as in insisting that industrialization will be the goal but social relations will adhere to traditional patterns—that has been the position of Saudi Arabia---and other times it is more thorough, as in, say, Egypt under President Nasir between 1952 and 1970, or Syria and Iraq at a certain epoch. But every Middle Eastern regime of the past century has both endorsed a program of economic and social modernization and sought to cultivate a national identity linked to culture. Most have also faced resistance from groups arguing that cultural traditions have been subverted or ignored. Almost every regime has encountered, cultivated, or repressed groups insisting that “true” Islam would suffice as an authentic answer to the problems of the state and the region. A revolution in Iran in 1979 created a regime dedicated to remaking Iranian culture in ways “authentic” to Islam and thoroughly modern.

In the wake of the 1967 defeat of three Arab states by Israel, Islamist movements began to gain strength in every Muslim-majority state, Arab and non-Arab alike. Islamism challenged the modernization/Westernization paradigm, and in doing so it effectively reaffirmed the significance of a cultural divide. In countries where Islamist movements have emerged dominant, as in Turkey and Iran, governments have replaced regimes dedicated to imposing Western culture in the name of modernity with governments anxious to promote another, more “authentic” cultural identity, by authoritarian means. Other governments have been able to fend off threats of Islamist victory at the polls with claims that the Islamists would rule in authoritarian fashion if ever they gained power. The atrocities that marked Algeria in the 1990s owed much to this misplaced notion of a world bifurcated by culture.

Israel was born from a Zionist movement that developed within the European notion of nationalism as a cultural phenomenon. It presumed the existence of a Jewish people and proposed a state that would be exclusively Jewish. Once established, the state also leaped toward the modernization paradigm in all its implications, including the creation of liberal, democratic institutions. This cultural affinity for the West implied citizenship for all, including Arabs and other non-Jews, which collided with the notion of cultural homogeneity in a Jewish state. In Israel's first thirty years of existence, it was liberal modernism that held sway under left-leaning governments, and the "traditional" Jews migrating from Arab countries (the Mizrahi) felt oppressed by the imposition of European culture. Some Palestinians remained hopeful for the ultimate triumph of the modernizing model while others embraced a nationalism of their own, but the tables have turned in Israeli politics in the last thirty years. The nationalist and religious blocs have dominated parliamentary politics in Israel and re-imposed an image of a state whose identity is thoroughly Jewish. Palestinians have no legitimate place in a state of that description. Identity politics divide Jews from non-Jews---and also each of those groups from within---even though factors such as economic well-being, environmental imperatives, and populations concentrated in a small territory militate for a single state that avoids the costs in lives and treasure of cultural divisions. Nationalism based in cultural identity does not do that. Neither does a parliamentary democracy whose walls reflect cultural constraints.

### **Universalism and Particularism**

Positing a single path of human development according to a European model, modernization theory has given rise to an internationalist commitment to human rights, which is either a challenge to authoritarianism or a protagonist of Western imperialism, depending on one's perspective. The claim of the movement, as expressed in the United Nations declaration of 1947 (UDHR), is that human rights come before culture and rise above culture. Such rights are said to be

universal, even though endorsement of them is not. Many states have embraced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but with reservations that reflect an effort to defend cultural norms that may conflict with the document. Moreover, some authorities argue that there is a universal right to culture, a claim that appears to undermine the idea that humanity is in fact uniform and universal. The international organizations that define themselves as defenders of universal human rights come out of the West with an objective of undercutting authoritarian practices in the MENA, but they also provoke authoritarian regimes to invoke cultural authenticity in defense of particularistic practices. International pressures enable minorities to employ the language of universal rights to advance and enhance cultural claims. In that respect the campaign for universal rights reinforces the idea of culture by way of resisting it.

The modernization paradigm has generated a body of thought justifies imperialistic ventures in the region. The key idea of such thought is that liberal democracy can succeed where the values and attitudes of the population are appropriately supportive, or, in other words, where the political culture is favorable. Survey research shows that values and attitudes in Western Europe and the United States differ from other parts of the world, primarily with respect to secularism but also in the degree of commitment to individual freedoms and liberties. Such research does not explain, though, how such values and attitudes come to prevail in some societies and not in others. The foreign policy of the United States has long sought to spread those ideas by funding academic exchange, building libraries, trumpeting the virtues of democracy on the airwaves, and funding groups to assist with electoral arrangements. The United States has pushed such policies in hopes of nudging authoritarian regimes in a liberal, democratic direction. Neo-conservatives in the United States claimed that the forceful overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the installation of a democratic regime in Iraq would trigger the emergence of a liberal democratic movement all across the region. Invasion became the tool for advancing what many protagonists took to be the inevitable progress

of democracy. One unintended result was solidification of the link between democratization and Western imperialism. While the invasion aimed to quash the Islamic radicalism revealed on September 11, 2001, it served instead to reignite resistance in Iraq and elsewhere to outside interference.

Culture constitutes a vital political resource, one that both governments and oppositional forces seek to exploit, because it secures particularism as a counterbalance to the universalist forces of liberal thought and practice. It can solidify majority support or define exclusion from the body politic. It can serve to rationalize international alliances or justify war. It may bring people together to mitigate the alienation produced by the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Effectively evoked, culture can nurture an illusion of uniqueness even as the world grows more homogeneous. Western liberalism, however particularistic its development, sees itself as universal, but, as Joseph Massad has observed, that development presumes an other and that other for Europe has long been Islam.<sup>22</sup> In his view, Islam is intrinsic to the development of Western civilization. Designating a civilization as Western presumes other civilizations or non-civilization; delineating a culture means there is another, and the other or others are usually inferior in the eyes of those making the delineations. The alternative assumption that all cultures are equal breeds relativism, which is as difficult to defend as universalism. The affirmation of either universalism or relativism requires a position beyond the reaches of any cultural bias.

Many aspects of politics in the Middle East and North Africa play out in that space where neither cultural particularism nor universalism is acceptable. Language issues, for example—the use of classical Arabic vs. the vernaculars—or the rules about women’s participation in politics and the economy reflect that dilemma. Nation-states want to be full participants in the undifferentiated world economy and utterly unique at the same time. The Saudi regime currently appears to be bowing to universal pressures to end its particularism, risking further opposition from an opposition

that has, to this point, come from those who believe that capitalistic transformation of the country jeopardizes morality and religious doctrine. The kingdom needs tradition to sustain an absolute monarchy and fend off republican forms of government. The monarchy must resist the enthusiasts of Wahhabi particularism to continue with its modernizing policies as it tries to satisfy the changing cultural aspirations of its subjects. Samuel P. Huntington called it the King's Dilemma: to conform to the dictates of global liberalism is to prepare the way for the fall of the monarchy, but to throttle change and insist upon Saudi particularism is perhaps to sacrifice the monarchy, as well.<sup>23</sup> The zigzag path of Saudi policy making suggests a periodic reweighing of the opposing threats.

### **Culture Seen from the Outside**

Identity politics matter to policymakers in every country of the region for multiple reasons. Political identities also matter to academics and journalists inside and outside the MENA. The sweeping assertions of Orientalism about Islam or the Islamic world have largely disappeared, but the modernization paradigm still has its champions,<sup>24</sup> despite challenge by scholars in several disciplines.<sup>25</sup> Secularism is the primary issue. Can a culture deeply influenced by religion become thoroughly modern in a political sense? It is an academic question that continues to draw the attention of scholars in the most general, abstract terms as well as its application to national contexts. Designating categories of people by their cultural affinities continues to be a mainstay of reporting on the MENA, despite uncertainty about the coherence and boundaries of such categories, probably because actors within the region depend upon them, too, for better or for worse. Observers within and without think that categories such as Sunni and Shiite may influence foreign policies. Proclaiming itself a Shiite state, Iran appears eager to assist Shiites in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Iran is also said to assist Hamas, a Sunni-dominated organization. It is all too easy to assume that labels cause actions, and that those included in such a category see membership as important to their identity. In Syria the Alawi label was long thought to apply to those with beliefs

only partially related to Islamic practices. Now the Alawis identify themselves as Muslims and as Shiite Muslims more particularly. The meaning of that label has changed. By its use of sectarian labels to allocate seats in Parliament, the Lebanese political system assures the importance of sectarian identities, though the labels do not have the same significance they did 75 years ago, when the system was invented. They have frozen the terms but they cannot freeze meanings, and this is exactly why labels, however useful, can be misleading and dangerous.

A problem that emerged in public perception after 9/11 was confusion of a category, Muslims, with a sub-category espousing an ideology based in part on claims anchored in Islamic discourse. Al-Qaida was a sub-category of a sub-category that embraced violence to achieve its goals at the international level. Arabs constitute a broad category that is already difficult to define. By one definition, it is a subset of those who speak the dialects of Arabic and who also support the idea that Arabs should unite in a single state. The Gush Emunim, the Block of the Faithful, fashioned an ideology from Jewish traditions to promote settlement in the West Bank. The protagonists of these culture-based ideologies nurtured the idea that they were the true, authentic representatives of a much larger category: Muslims, Arabs, or Jews. They sought political support in that fashion, and with some success. Many Muslims found it difficult to denounce Osama bin Laden. Non-religious parties ended up supporting Israeli settlers even when the settlements in the West Bank compromised the possibility of a two-state solution. Arabs all across the region were reluctant to oppose the charismatic Egyptian president, Gamal Abd al-Nasir and his appeal for Arab unity. And the broad support accorded such groups in the region affected the foreign understanding of these ideologies, making it all too easy to confuse Muslims with Islamists, only some of whom pursued their agendas with violence.

Whatever the drawbacks of invoking them, it is difficult to dismiss the concept of cultural identities in discussing the MENA, because actors inside and outside the region have come to rely

on it to make claims, object to policies, assert interests, repress dissidents, court foreign powers, and justify all sorts of exclusivist and aggressive behavior. That does not mean that any one of these actions necessarily follows from cultural identities or that the cultural claims taken as a whole constitute an assault on liberal universalism, a defense of disadvantaged minorities, or a concerted attack on the modernization paradigm. Such claims may do some or all those things, but they may also serve to reinforce authoritarianism, justify cruelty and intolerance, or paralyze a polity. Culture as a concept cannot serve to explain why political identities, based in language, religion, or ethnicity emerge from the obscurity of indifference to powerful political motivators and why cultural differences suddenly come to inspire political actions.

### **Plan of the Book**

Language and religion are two of the principal dividers of majority from minority in most countries of the Middle East and North Africa. They might seem to be part of the political woodwork, immovable barriers to harmony and cooperation; Chapter Two seeks to show that they are in fact variables, politicized and manipulated by regimes to further their conceptions of national identity. Regimes emerging from revolutionary circumstances have been especially aggressive in seeking to politicize religion and language to alter the political landscape in their countries. All regimes have faced challenges from subnational groups that evoke language or religion in ideological fashion. Islamists of various stripes, Kurds, Berbers, and many other groups draw on interpretations of the past to anchor contemporary political demands.

Much of what is commonly said about women in the region invokes cultural practices as an explanation. If there were a single set of cultural rules affecting women, then women would experience the same problems and opportunities everywhere in the region, but that is not the case. Chapter Three seeks to explain some of the enormous diversity in the condition of women from one country to another, and from one region within a country to another. Why do the cultures

affecting women vary so significantly? How is it that one can account for the divergence between the rights available to women in Tunisia compared to those enjoyed by women in Saudi Arabia, two Arab Muslim countries albeit at somewhat different levels of economic well being? Why have certain countries moved swiftly against traditional patriarchy while others have not? Why do conflicts ostensibly about culture come to focus on the activities of women? Why women become such important cultural symbols in many states?

With the breakup of empires in the region—first the Ottoman, then the French and the British—nationalism has been central to the politics of the region. While nationalism does not inevitably politicize culture as a source of identity—witness the example of the United States—the MENA has tended to follow the European model by invoking cultural affinities to legitimate national claims. Every state calls upon culture in some fashion as part of its national narrative, yet cultural categories cross boundaries and undermine nationalist claims rather than reinforcing them. That fact threatens the stability of some states much more severely than others. Monarchies treat culture differently than republics. New states face different problems than those with long histories. The place of culture in Middle Eastern nationalism is the subject of Chapter Four.

Political culture is a term devised in the hope of discovering a set of values and attitudes thought to encourage democratic development, or, in contrast, to support authoritarianism. The framework is the “political culture” of the nation-state, not the region as a whole, though the concept emerges from modernization theory, itself hostile to cultural differences. The term seeks to bring the particular circumstances of politics into the realm of comparative political theory; it attempts to explain the impact of a particular political context in broad, comparative, universal terms. Chapter Five evaluates some of the literature on political culture and then seeks to apply it to the case of Tunisia, the state that appeared to emerge most successfully from the revolts of the Arab Spring and showed promise of establishing a stable democracy. I will try to show that the concept,

though flawed, may be useful if redefined to include an explanation for change: why an authoritarian political culture might turn democratic or why a liberal state might revert to authoritarianism.

Without further development, the term lacks dynamism and explanatory power.

In the concluding chapter I try to explain why cultural issues have become ever more prominent in the politics of every country and in the international politics of the region as a whole. Fifty years ago external observers tended to emphasize class as a factor that would steer development in the region. Several countries took guidance from socialist ideology and others attached themselves fervently to capitalist agendas. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a tendency in political science to downplay the importance of culture and especially its religious component. No longer is that possible. Cultural agendas have become salient in the region. Is this a passing phenomenon destined to be forgotten in the long-term march of secularism, globalization, and homogenization? Or does it represent an enduring characteristic of the twenty-first century? This book cannot promise answers about the future, but it might help illuminate the sorts of choices that face actors and analysts alike.

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  5. Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.)
  6. Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle East Studies in America* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001.)
  7. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 260.
  8. Said, *Orientalism*, 45, quoted in Clifford, 261.
  9. Said, *Orientalism*, 325, quoted in Clifford, 274.
  10. Pascal Boyer, *Minds Make Societies: How Cognition Explains the World Humans Create* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 29.
  11. See Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), Chapter 2, for an interesting discussion of liberal universalism.
  12. Elliott Abrams, *Realism and Democracy: American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017). For a critique of liberal universalism, see David Hendrickson, *Republic in Peril: American Empire and the Liberal Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 76ff.
  13. Seyla Benhabib, ix.
  14. Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic and Religious Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 117.
  15. Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *The Dilemma of Context* (New York: NYU Press, 1989), 173.

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16. Clifford, 10.
  17. Wedeen, "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science," 714.
  18. Michael Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics : Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.)
  19. The phrase has appeared in titles such as Richard J. Ellis and Michael Thompson, eds., *Culture Matters: Essays in Honor of Aaron Wildavsky* (Boulder: Westview, 1997.) and Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
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  21. See Laura Robson, *States of Separation* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).
  22. Joseph A. Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
  23. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
  24. Christian Welzel, *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
  25. Richard W. Bulliet, among many others, makes a strong case against the secularization hypothesis in *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), Chapter 3.