

Chapter 2

Language and Religion

In the Middle East and North Africa the word “culture” has usually been identified with language, ethnicity, and religion. Surveys of public opinion include questions about minorities, about tolerance, and about religious denomination. Analysts use the surveys to create indexes of homogeneity and diversity, but they do not explain why language differences may be important in one country and not in another; or why Shia and Sunnis within a state may live easily together at one time and not at another. Common sense would suggest that differences in language and religion influence political outcomes, but it does not account for political decisions about language and religion that underpin the cultural climate of a country. Nor does common sense account for the fact that apparent cultural constants, religion and language, produce different practices and different meanings across time and space.

Anyone seeking to understand culture as a route to comprehending the politics of an Arab country would be well advised to study Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). In addition, he or she would also be advised to know something about Islam. But neither sort of academic enterprise, even if fruitfully pursued within the target country, will suffice to explain why Country X elects MSA as its official language, rather than the spoken language (or languages) of the country; why it permits only some television shows in commonly spoken dialects; why it permits or outlaws some Sufi organizations but not others; or how it relates to Islamist groups. Such policies do not necessarily follow from the ethnic, linguistic, religious makeup of a country. Rather, government decisions about language and religion and groups acting in ways they believe faithful to religious traditions that shape political discourse. Culture shapes politics through agents who seek to utilize conventional

understandings as a basis for revising material or cultural circumstances in which they happen to function at a given moment in time.

In the common view, Islam and Arabic have been the dominant forces in the region, but these abstract terms do not exert influence without the assistance of human beings who practice, employ, manipulate and ultimately shape these forces. In this part of the world, the human beings with the greatest access to power and resources, and therefore the greatest ability to politicize Islam and Arabic, have been of two sorts: imperialists and nationalists. In challenging the Ottoman Empire, European imperialism altered religious practices and allegiances in the region. By stimulating nationalist response, the Europeans provoked social movements that emphasized modernization of languages, sharpening of ethnic boundaries, and use of religion as a political tool. Printed, updated, and modernized in the nineteenth century, Classical Arabic became an essential element in the construction of Pan-Arabism and an important instrument of the Islamist movements that, beginning with the Muslim Brotherhood, came to be dynamic political forces throughout the region.

Imperialism encountered a multiplicity of linguistic and religious traditions and sought to alter almost all of them for a variety of self-interested reasons. The French tried for more than 130 years to make Algeria into a French-speaking country, doing their best to reduce the use and teaching of Arabic. They also sought to gain control of the Muslim religious establishment. The British never tried to wipe out Egyptian Arabic, but they did ban certain violent Sufi practices and help “organize” official Islam for the benefit of the British-dominated state. By seeking to defend minorities in the late Ottoman Empire, the Russians, French, and British pushed reforms that stirred ethnic and religious conflict. Was there any instance of imperial intervention in the area that failed to affect language and culture?

Perhaps the greatest impact of European intervention was unintentional: the introduction of nationalist doctrine, which called for common language and common religion. Greeks, Serbians, Turks, Jews, Egyptians, and other groups of people began to demand nationhood. Classical Arabic became the vehicle of Arabs nurturing the idea of a single Arab state. Turks defined themselves in terms of language and, simultaneously, sought to redefine Islam as a national religion. The Zionists revived Hebrew as a national language and invoked Jewishness (ethnic or religious) as a commonality. Egyptians defined themselves as Arabs and Muslims but sought independence as Egyptians. Iran asserted its independence as a Persian-speaking, Shiite state. Thus, imperialism and nationalism utterly transformed the significance of language and religion in the region. Those two forces caused language and religion to become politicized.

Imperialism

Neither the Ottoman nor the Persian empires, which dominated the Middle East and North Africa before the nineteenth century, sought linguistic uniformity. In each empire there was a formal, written administrative language, Ottoman Turkish or Persian, and a formal religious language, Arabic, but both were polyglot empires. Only elites spoke Ottoman Turkish, which itself incorporated heavy doses of Persian and Arabic vocabulary. Religious elites preserved and taught classical Arabic and its rigid grammar everywhere, whatever the local spoken language or dialect, and the spoken languages in the Arab countries from Iraq to Morocco were presumably as diverse as they are today. Some of the vernaculars are still not mutually comprehensible. The ideal Ottoman subject was a Turkish-speaking Muslim, but there were also non-Turkish and non-Muslim residents of the Ottoman territories, such as those in the European provinces or the Armenians and the Kurds of the eastern Anatolian peninsula. The Persian Empire included Turkish speaking Azeris, Kurds, Baluch, Arabic-speakers and others.

Both empires might have wished for religious uniformity but they did not come close to achieving that objective. The Ottomans based their legal system in the Sunni tradition, and the Safavid dynasty that established itself in Persia in 1501 imported the expertise needed to make Shiism the dominant version of Islam in that country, but since it had little practical control over the tribal areas, it only succeeded in winning the heartland. Sunni minorities, whether Kurdish or Baluch, survived in Persia as did Shiites (Twelvers, Ismailis, Zaidis) or post-Shiites (Alevi, Druze) in the Ottoman Empire. And then there were Christians of multiple sorts and Jews with a variety of religious orientations.

Such is the vibrant quilt of cultures that Europeans encountered in the nineteenth century as they propelled themselves ever more insistently into this part of the world. Yet the picture they drew for themselves bore little relationship to that diverse reality. As Edward Said has shown, the Europeans approached the area as if it were uniform in culture, a culture sharply different from their own because ostensibly at odds with science, logic, Christianity, and the modern state.¹ European scholars portrayed this area as one dominated by Islam and knowable via the texts of that religion recorded in Classical Arabic. These students of the “Orient” with their command of formal Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish led the way in creating an image of the region that fed European fear and curiosity, on the one hand, and dominating, “civilizing” impulses, on the other. Orientalists portrayed a clash of civilizations, but the West did not assault the Middle East and North Africa as a civilization; rather, individual European nation-states, mainly Great Britain and France, undertook actions that were distinct even if similarly aggressive. And the impact on the region was pointed and specific, not generic. It was the French under a rambunctious, irresponsible general named Napoleon Bonaparte who invaded Egypt in 1798, hoping to embarrass Great Britain in the process. Instead the French embarrassed themselves, and Britain later shocked the French by invading Egypt

(1882).

The sharp differences portrayed by the Orientalists might have served to rationalize imperialist policies, but they do not explain them. Marxist arguments that imperialism results inevitably from capitalism come up short of explaining what happened in Egypt, Algeria, or the Ottoman Empire. If some Europeans thought of imperialism as a civilizing mission, that does not explain nationalistic ventures undertaken to fend off European rivals or to impress the public back home. Revolutionary nationalism fueled the enthusiasm and effectiveness of Napoleon's expeditionary force but it did not necessarily require invasion of Egypt. Rivalry among the European powers does more to explain discrete policy decisions than any social scientific necessity requiring a "clash of civilizations." Rather than any hypothetical threat from the Arab-Islamic world, it was weakness produced by political, social, linguistic, and religious fragmentation that attracted and facilitated European intervention.

The cultural impact differed by virtue of both the aggressors and the victims. In Egypt, where the French military presence was short-lived, the end of Ottoman control opened the way for sweeping cultural change under a new, Turkish-speaking dynasty headed by Muhammad Ali. As Timothy Mitchell has argued, Muhammad Ali imposed a new discipline on Egyptian society that included schools organized in the European way.² In thoroughly modern fashion, he and his successors saw replacing the Quranic school, the *kuttab*, with state-run institutions as a step toward social control.³ Some of those schools taught French, rather than classical Arabic, thus undercutting one of the functions of the religious scholars (*ulama*).

Muhammad Ali also began to establish hierarchy among the *ulama* and to reduce their autonomy by nationalizing land put in trust for the benefit of religious institutions (*waqf*). He sought to bring the religious establishment under state control—a process that continued for the next two

centuries in Egypt.⁴ While Egyptian Arabic remained the spoken language of the country, the introduction of the printing press in about 1800 and the increased production of books printed in Arabic after 1850—despite resistance from the ulama—began to disentangle classical Arabic from the practice of religion and from the oral intercession of the clerical class.⁵ The necessity for modernizing the language became apparent.

When the British stepped into Egypt some 80 years after Napoleon, they found a country transformed by the governance of Muhammad Ali and his impecunious successors, who sought to modernize the country at a breakneck pace by borrowing from greedy European investors. Assuming control to frustrate an Egyptian uprising against the Turkish-speaking rulers, and thereby protect European interests, the British further accelerated the introduction of state schooling, the cultivation of Arabic, the teaching of Islam, and state domination of the Islamic establishment. Of course, they also launched English-language schools that drew some of the elite away from French as a second language. By the end of the century, Egyptians were beginning to argue for Egyptian Arabic as a national language as opposed to classical Arabic and to consider whether government should be religious or secular.⁶ Were Egyptians to think of themselves as Arabs first and Egyptians second, or vice versa? What was the place of Coptic Christians, if Islam were to be understood as the religion of Egypt? By encouraging public schools with instruction in Arabic and by assuring that Islam be taught in those schools, the British helped solidify the Egyptian bases of pan-Arabism and political Islam. Language and religion had become problematic aspects of the push for a modern nation. Gregory Starrett writes:

In documenting the role of the contemporary school in teaching Islam, I hope to show how the expansion and transfer of religious socialization from private to newly created public sector institutions over the last century has led to a comprehensive

revision of the way Egyptians treat Islam as a religious tradition, and consequently of Islam's role in Egyptian society.⁷

French conquest in North Africa triggered a different sequence of developments. The French took 30 years beyond the initial invasion of 1830 to establish full control of Algeria. Once they had done so, and decided to make that colony an integral part of France, they launched a century-long campaign to make Algerians speak French.⁸ The French did manage to reduce literacy in classical Arabic from what is estimated to be about 40 or 50 per cent at the conquest to perhaps ten per cent at independence by suppressing the Quranic schools (*kuttabs*) where Arabic was taught and replacing them with modern schools, teaching in French.⁹ Yet the primary spoken languages of the country, vernacular versions of Arabic and Berber, were the same at independence as they had been at the conquest.

Most Algerians long shunned the French schools, which were dominated by European settlers and local Jews, who acquired French citizenship in 1871. Berbers of the Kabylia area east of Algiers responded in greater numbers to French schooling than Arabic speakers, solidifying a French notion that they were the more modern, progressive element of the population, despite their rural origins. By World War II, "The majority of Kabyle males no longer acquired Arabic as a second language but French."¹⁰ By independence, roughly one million Algerians were literate in French, and about six million spoke the language, while perhaps 300,000 were literate in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). In a poll taken in 2000, 60 per cent of households said they spoke or understood French.¹¹

It was the religious class that taught classical Arabic in Algeria as elsewhere, and French administrators saw this class as threatening. They sought to undermine its autonomy and authority by controlling appointments to major mosques and putting *ulama* on the public payroll. Sufi orders

and local saint cultures benefitted from greater neglect if not favoritism from the French. While Christianity flourished among the settler population, it made few converts among Muslims. Yet, by virtue of its introduction and presence in Algeria, the identification of Christianity with the colonial/settler presence made Arabic and all versions of Islam into badges of authenticity and resistance.

The French established “protectorates” in Tunisia (1882) and Morocco (1904), which meant they kept governing structures in place (a Turkish beylik in Tunis, a monarchy in Morocco) and ruled the country around and through them. The French language made great inroads in these countries, too, and the emphasis on modern schools, already begun in Tunisia before the French conquest, reduced the importance of religious officials in the educational process at all levels. The Sadiqi School began training Tunisian elites in secular fashion, even though the Zitouna mosque-university also continued to function—drawing about as many students from Algeria as from France in the period preceding WWII. In Morocco, the French effort to apply a legal code to the Berber-speaking population different from that affecting those speaking the Arabic vernacular provoked protest and consciousness of an issue that was otherwise more muted in Tunisia and Morocco than in Algeria. With smaller settler populations, and retention of traditional authorities as a facade, French domination of Morocco and Tunisia did not result in the politicization of the language/religion issue to the same degree as in Algeria. That is, the nationalist movements in these two countries later sought to reinforce instruction in Arabic but did not try to wipe out the widespread use of French, as did the Algerians. The French colonial presence altered the significance of so-called “primordial” identification with language and religion in all three of these North African states.

European encroachment on the Middle East and North Africa produced long-term shifts in

the significance of language and religion in political identities almost everywhere and especially in the Ottoman Empire. The founder of the empire, Osman, was a Turkish speaking warrior for Islam. To be among the Ottoman elite meant being a Turk and a Muslim, even though the empire encompassed a myriad of languages and religions. Thus when the empire, in its efforts to strengthen itself militarily, economically, and politically in the face of European competition and threat, decided to declare all its subjects “equal” before the law, as a part of reforms undertaken in 1839, Muslim Turks felt demoted from their special place in the social hierarchy.¹² Other groups that had enjoyed some ability to manage their own affairs under the millet system now felt entitled to emerge from their subordinate status. The Greeks had already taken their independence in 1821. Now others, with support from the European powers, felt bolder in advancing their grievances and claims. Rather than rallying to sustain the Ottoman state, as the reformers imagined they might, some groups dreamed of independence. Some urban Arabs, for example, began to argue that they were a single people destined to unite and form a state of their own.

While Europe identified the Ottoman Empire with Islam, the Ottomans could not rely on Islam as a rallying cry because many of their subjects were non-Muslims. However, as they lost more and more of their European provinces to Russia and then to independence movements—areas that were predominantly Christian—they resorted to Islam as a last, desperate appeal for unity. Abdulhamid II proclaimed himself caliph, hence hypothetically the leader of the Muslim world, in hopes of strengthening the Ottoman state in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In doing so he contributed to a politicization of religion that would mark much of the region including republican Turkey in the twentieth century.

Protestant missionaries brought printing presses to Beirut in the middle of the nineteenth century. Although presses in Cairo had already published a few books in Arabic, Beirut became the

focus of an effort to update classical Arabic with the words needed to describe the modern world. It was there and in Damascus that secret societies formed to promote pan-Arabism.¹³ The printing press transformed the ability of Arabs to reach each other across the region. Newspapers, pamphlets and books in Arabic multiplied quickly at the end of the century. In the minds of some, these developments threatened the divine status of the language as well as the social position of those who taught the language orally, person-to-person. Those most devoted to traditional ways argued that words should be heard aloud, not absorbed from a page, and the language should not be corrupted by foreign expressions. Fortunately, modernists were able to utilize the flexibility of Arabic, produced by the variety of verbs and nouns available from each fundamental set of three consonants, to create fresh terms that sounded natural in Arabic. The printing press was a tool of imperialist rule in French North Africa, Egypt, and elsewhere, but it also became a tool of nationalism as it was in Europe.¹⁴

European imperialism did not pollute or destroy some natural, idyllic, primordial distributions of language and religion; it disrupted elements of the pattern and tipped the balance in new directions. By reinforcing the autonomy of a country called Egypt, or by generating borders for entities called Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, the imperial powers paved the way for nationalism, which latched onto both language and religion with passion and tenacity. The wave of imperialism sweeping through the MENA before 1900 affected the use and significance of language most significantly in North Africa, but it affected the meaning of religious and ethnic identifications elsewhere. As the Ottoman and the Qajar empires engaged in defensive modernization, they sought to reinforce central authority and reduce the autonomy of linguistic and religious minorities. Imperialism spurred resistance movements, such as Mahdism in the Sudan. Though squelched by the British, Mahdism blazed a trail toward modern Islamism. The Saudi kingdom in Arabia, which

had since the eighteenth century linked itself to a radical, puritanical form of Islam called Wahhabism, revived in the early 1900s and, thanks to British favors and protection, managed to extend its control beyond the Najd region to most of the peninsula. The kingdom's expansion extended the reach and authority of Wahhabism to areas initially hostile, such as the Hijaz region where Mecca and Medina are located, and the Eastern Province, where Shiism was prominent. Wahhabism met hostility in these areas but remained a fixture of Saudi political identity.

After defeating the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the European powers established borders for new nations (Syria, Iraq, Transjordan, Palestine) without apparent regard for ethnic or religious identities.¹⁵ These decisions appear irrational, if one assumes that there were “natural” nations waiting to emerge, as liberal theorists argued. It is difficult to imagine what those nations would have been, what the borders would have looked like, and how much forced migration would have been required to make those nations more homogeneous than the states that emerged. What is clear is that the imposition of arbitrary boundaries made it certain that language and religion would become political issues in the future. All the new states lacked legitimacy in the terms that the nationalism of the era demanded: common language, common religion, common history. What other resources were available for the construction of national identities? Flags were not enough. These states all invoked language and religion as facets of identity, inventing history as necessary to support their claims.

Nationalism

Turkey

The states created from Ottoman territory tried to reshape the cultural practices of their citizens to fit the expectations of nation-states. Deeply influenced as they were by European and especially French notions of what it meant to be modern, the Turks led the way. Mustafa Kemal

Atatürk and his fellow Turkish officers waged a successful fight against the peace treaty of Sèvres (1920) that Europe sought to impose upon them. By defeating Greek forces, the victorious Turks won a new agreement, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), and proceeded to launch a republican state with borders approximating those of modern Turkey: the Anatolian peninsula plus a small wedge of Europe including Istanbul. With the knowledge and assent of the League of Nations, the Turks encouraged a massive shift in populations---Christian Orthodox to the West, Muslims to the East---which the leadership saw as a positive contribution to nation-building.¹⁶

The Kemalists sought to build their new state on fresh conceptions of both religion and language. Following the French understanding of secular modernity and the European understanding of nationalism, they banned religion from the public sphere and made vernacular, spoken Turkish the national language written in the Roman alphabet, in place of Ottoman Turkish, which used the Arabic script and included liberal doses of Arabic-cognate vocabulary.¹⁷

It is hard to exaggerate the magnitude of this assault on Ottoman culture in the name of national solidarity. In building support for the fight against the Greeks for national independence, Mustafa Kemal and his fellow officers used Islam as a reason why even non-Turkish groups such as the Kurds should support the cause.¹⁸ Once the battle was won, the new republic abolished not just the Ottoman sultanate but also the concept of the caliphate, embraced by some as the highest office in Islam, although most of the Ottoman sultans had not claimed such an office. Many Muslims quite rightly interpreted this as a strike against Islam. The republicans dismantled the office of shaykh ul-Islam, which employed the leading Islamic scholars of the empire, and outlawed Sufi orders that had been a fixture of religious life in Anatolia for hundreds of years. Their meeting places became museums, if they were not destroyed. The republic established a directorate of religious affairs to appoint officials and insure that the version of Islam being taught and practiced would not conflict

with a state that defined itself as secular. Religious leaders were forbidden to wear their religious garb, except when performing official functions; a 1932 law required that the call to prayer be in Turkish.¹⁹ Such were some of the efforts of the Turkish Republic to render Islam consistent with its conception of modernity. Hanioglu writes: “Atatürk did not attempt to provide Islamic responses to the challenges of modernity but tried to transform Islam into a system fully embracing it.”²⁰

The Kemalists tended to agree with the Orientalist analysis that Islamic culture represented backwardness and obstructed change, a fact that helps explain why Kemal launched an assault on many aspects of Ottoman culture including language, religion, and dress. He sought to cut the new Turkey away from its Ottoman past by proposing an identity for the new nation built upon a narrative of Turkish history that bordered on racism. A recent book insists that the Kemalist leadership avoided racism by insisting that any citizen loyal to the republic should be considered a Turk, but some nationalist followers insisted upon portraying Turks as an ethnic group with distinctive (and superior) characteristics. Kemalism did avoid claims to represent all Turkish speakers in central Asia (pan-Turanism), claims that would surely have led to conflict with the Soviet Union and perhaps Iran, both harboring large populations speaking dialects of Turkish.²¹ The very name chosen for the new republic implied cultural identification.

At first the Kemalist model appeared enormously successful. In a Turkey weary of war and uncertainty, the republic won broad support and succeeded in radically transforming the political culture of Istanbul and the new capital, Ankara, as well as the urban areas of Western Anatolia. A few representatives of the old ways surfaced to challenge these cultural transformations. One such person was Said Nursi, a Kurdish religious scholar and employee in the office of the Shaykh ul-Islam, chief religious official in the Ottoman state. Summoned by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to assume governmental responsibilities in the new republic, Nursi declined appointment but assured Kemal he

would not oppose the government. Instead he began preaching and attracting followers in a way that appeared Sufi in inspiration but focused not on mystical practices but on a modern text, his *Epistle of Light*, which was hand-copied thousands of times in Ottoman Turkish. The regime forbade publication. Crowds flocked to his sessions, even when the government consigned him to forced residence in western Turkey. He defied the restrictions on religion, language, and even dress, vowing that his turban would stay on his head, even if he were decapitated.²²

The success of Nursi and of those who followed him—including one of his most prominent protégés, Fethullah Gülen, the religious leader accused of plotting a coup against President Erdoğan in 2016—revealed the fragility of the Kemalist triumph. In the 1950s, with the advent of competitive elections, religion again became a factor in public life. Nursi's writings won publication, mysticism in the form of Sufi orders resurfaced, religion achieved greater prominence in education, and political Islam began to challenge the prevailing conceptions of nationalism. The government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which took control of Turkey in 2002, asserted its loyalty to the Kemalist conceptions even as it sought to undermine them by enhancing the Islamist character of Istanbul, invoking the glories of the Ottoman Empire, and encouraging the spread of Islamic fashion even in public places. The Kemalist decision to make vernacular Turkish the primary language of the state held up better than the effort to transform the religious culture of the country but not without cost. The emphasis on Turkish entailed hostility toward the use of Kurdish dialects in the schools of eastern Turkey and contributed to resistance in the predominantly Kurdish zones. Erdoğan did not succeed in bringing the Kurds under his populist umbrella.

According to Benedict Anderson, modern European nationalism emerged from the print revolution, which stimulated a sharp increase in literacy and the formation of reading publics in the principal vernacular languages of the continent. Latin lost ground.²³ Turkey's decision to abandon

Ottoman Turkish for a modern, simplified, Romanized version of Turkish does not surprise in that context. But elsewhere in the region it was not the vernacular languages that prevailed. The Zionist movement chose to ignore Yiddish, the vernacular of Eastern European Jewry, and revive Hebrew, a language of religion unspoken outside temples. In most of the Arabic-speaking countries, the choice was similar: a modernized version of Quranic Arabic that no one spoke as a mother tongue. It garnered favor for its relationship to religion but also, in some countries, for its “authenticity,” as opposed to Ottoman Turkish or French, English, or Italian. For some in the region Arabic represented both a commitment to mainstream Sunni Islam and to a political project of Arab unity that threatened independent nations.²⁴ Decisions about language carried implications for religion. Decisions about religion necessarily reflected and influenced decisions about language. Every state in the region has necessarily made a set of cultural decisions that, in turn, become conditions of politics.

Israel

The Zionist movement rivals the Turkish state in the boldness of its effort to reshape political culture. The apostle of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl, wrote his seminal book, *The Jewish State*, in German, responding primarily to anti-Semitism even in the most progressive country of Western Europe, France. He wrote as the Dreyfus affair unfurled there. The primary audience for his appeal, however, lay primarily in Poland and Russia, in the Pale of Settlement, areas where Jewish communities spoke Yiddish as well as European languages. The Zionists of the second and third waves to settle in Palestine, from 1904 to 1920, found themselves a part of a secular, socialist movement with little time for formal religious practice. Yet, so convinced were they of nationalist ideology that they settled on Hebrew as the national language, even though it was then spoken regularly by almost no one. Moreover, they stuck with this choice even after independence when

immigrants began to arrive in vast numbers from the countries speaking dialects of Arabic, such as Iraq and Morocco, not to mention Jews with still other linguistic backgrounds, as in the case of Ethiopians.²⁵ The battle against Yiddish was long and difficult but largely successful, and while the Palestinian version of Arabic never ceased to be an important language, the emphasis on Hebrew as the national language rendered Arabic anti-Zionist from the start and even now an indicator of second-class citizenship in Israel. The tension persists in education, road signs, and publications. The effort of an Arab Israeli to write and publish in the national language, Hebrew, has elicited protest, for example.²⁶ English has achieved a prominent role in Israel for its access to the broader world, and Russian has reasserted itself through the arrival of Jews and non-Jews after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Thus, Israel is a multilingual society in practice even though one language has privileged status.

Zionism sought to impose a single language in order to foster nationalist sentiment on the European model. It did not try to impose a single religion. Quite the contrary, the early Zionists sought to separate religion from ethnicity. Even at the moment of independence, David Ben-Gurion imagined that the state might attract Jews without establishing a state religion. It was not just the Labor Zionists of the second and third waves of immigration (*aliyot*) that took this position. The Revisionists who arrived in the 1920s and called for hard-nosed nationalism based on borders and security did so, too. These relatively secular conceptions of Zionism encountered resistance from both Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox groups. Initially skeptical of the Zionist enterprise as an effort to interfere with the work of God, the Orthodox eventually moved toward support of the emerging state by following the ideas of Rabbi Kook, who argued that this movement might be a precursor to Jewish salvation. He persuaded many Orthodox settlers that Jewish tradition could sanction Zionism and the government it was about to found, but the Ultra-Orthodox were not seduced by such

theories. Though indifferent to Zionism, they agreed to accept the state in return for an understanding with Ben-Gurion. The difference of opinion about religion prevented the adoption of a constitution, but in fact the state awarded privileges to the Orthodox and the Ultra-Orthodox that have since been enhanced in the Israeli political system. While Christians, Muslims, and other groups can meet freely, many laws privileged Orthodox rules about Jewish identity, marriage, family law, and other matters. The ultra-Orthodox won exemption from military service for their Yeshiva students. In recent years the Israeli government has decided to insist that Palestinians recognize Israel not just as a state but as a Jewish state, if negotiations are to continue. This would appear to be an assertion about the religious character of the state.

Israel has not been successful with its efforts to unite the state on the basis of either language or religion. Hebrew does not unite all citizens, nor does Judaism in any of its multiple forms. Quite the contrary, Jewish nationalism has reduced religious and language diversity by virtue of its efforts to promote Hebrew, but it has also exacerbated conflict within and without. The dedication to Hebrew made it difficult for Jews immigrating from the Middle East and North Africa to assimilate, and the promotion of Hebrew tilted the country away from the native language of the country, Arabic, making Arabs foreigners in their own land. The decisions about religion, which might be termed a set of non-decisions, sharpened differences within Judaism and gave a political significance to the differences between Muslims and Jews. These modern conflicts stem not from inherent cultural differences but from the efforts to implement a concept of national identity in which common language is a primary goal if not a necessity. Government actions have politicized both language and religion in that effort.

Iraq

The effort to employ Arabic for purposes of national identity started in Iraq, which was the

first of the mandated territories to achieve independence (1928). In his correspondence with Sir Henry McMahon during WWI, Sharif Hussein of Mecca, an Ottoman functionary with responsibility for the Holy Places of Islam, had asked the British to create a single Arab state encompassing all of the Arabian peninsula and the modern states of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine. His son Faisal had been in touch with pan-Arab circles in Beirut and Damascus and generated something of a following such that, when British troops under General Allenby opened the way for Faisal and his band of Arabs to take control of Damascus, Syrians rallied around him as a leader. Among his entourage was Sati al-Husri, an intellectual dedicated to the notion of Pan Arabism, who wrote an eloquent account of the French expulsion of Faisal from Damascus as they took control of that mandated territory.²⁷ The British consoled Faisal, presumably in part from guilt over the promises to his father Hussein, by putting him on the throne of their mandated territory, Iraq.

Sati al-Husri accompanied Faisal to Iraq and became minister of education. In that role he dedicated himself to the expansion of schools and the teaching of a modernized form of classical Arabic. The political motives for pushing classical Arabic were clear: opposition to the Turkishness of the Ottoman Empire, opposition to colonialism, and promotion of the idea that there existed a common Arab heritage shared by peoples from Iraq to Morocco, who nonetheless spoke different vernaculars.²⁸ As natives of the Arabian peninsula, King Faisal and his closest advisers sought to define Iraq as a Arab state linked with other Arab states including Egypt (which had been excluded from the Sharif Hussein's proposed delimitation of a single Arab state). The Ottomans, themselves Sunni, governed the districts of Baghdad and Basra with the help of Arab Sunni elites. In promoting written Arabic as the language of the country, King Faisal and Sati al-Husri necessarily promoted Islam—so tight were the ties between language and religion—even though neither of them was

particularly religious. How the Kurdish population of northeastern Iraq---roughly a fourth of the population speaking at least two major dialects---fit into this understanding of modern Iraq, remains unclear to this day. As mainly Sunni in religious orientation, the Kurds found themselves divided by both language and religion from the Arab Shia, who constitute roughly 50 per cent of the population but who were under represented in government until the American invasion of 2003.

The effort to generate popular support for the new state of Iraq, which was not homogeneous in either language or religion, rendered the question of national unity fundamental. The commitment to Modern Standard Arabic reflected a commitment to an imagined community still in formation and a bid to be the leader of that community. It also gave other states a stake in Iraqi politics, as became apparent after the Egyptian revolution of 1952 brought Gamal abd al-Nasir to power. When in 1955 Great Britain and the United States devised the Baghdad Pact to defend against the Soviet Union, they bolstered the Iraqi position and offended Nasir in Egypt. Nasir excoriated the regime in Iraq for its unwillingness to join Egypt and Syria in the United Arab Republic of 1958, cheered when the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown, and then reverted to scathing criticism of the new Iraqi regime headed by Abdel Karim Qasim, who backed away from pan-Arabism to focus on an Iraqi nationalism. The Iraqi commitment to a pan-Arab identity entangled that country in conflicts it has never been able to resolve.

The Baath Party, created by pan-Arabists Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar, gained power in Syria and Iraq in the 1960s. That fact drew the two countries together, in theory, but further conversations about unifying Iraq, Syria, and Egypt went nowhere in 1964, and by the 1970s the regimes of Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr in Iraq and Hafiz al-Asad in Syria, both supported by “regional” sections of the “national” Baath Party, found themselves locked in uncomfortable embrace. Eric Davis has chronicled with great lucidity the struggles of the Iraqi regime under al-Bakr and then

under his henchman and ambitious successor, Saddam Hussein, to define the country in a way that would pull it together.²⁹ In the 1970s Hussein began to trumpet Iraq as the inheritor of pre-Islamic, Babylonian glories. In doing so, he emphasized the secularism of the regime and also its difficulties with pan-Arabism. Later, as he tried to rally support for his war with Iran, he rediscovered the pan-Arab appeal but failed to enlist the support of his fellow Baathists in Syria! Moreover, Arabs of the Gulf States who loaned him vast sums of money to conduct that war insisted upon being repaid afterwards. Pan-Arabism did not, of course, help him with the Kurds, who showed all too much empathy for the Iranian regime. That is apparently why Hussein ended up gassing Kurdish villages toward the end of the Iran–Iraq war.³⁰ When Hussein launched an attack on Kuwait in 1990, pan-Arabism did not provide much help. Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, did leap to Baghdad in support, and the Jordanians, heavily populated by refugees from Palestine, refused to join the coalition to defeat the Iraqis, but other Arab states helped defeat the Iraqis and liberate Kuwait.

One certainly cannot blame Sati al-Husri and pan-Arabism for all the troubles of modern Iraq. The carving up of the Ottoman Empire into future nation-states created new crucibles of conflict. Changing modes of communication (railroads, telegraph, automobiles, and the printing press) drew people together across boundaries even as they were being separated. Sati al-Husri promoted pan-Arabism as a defensive mechanism in an epoch when Jamal al-Din al-Afghani promoted pan-Islam. The idea of a single Kurdish state surfaced at the end of WWI, even though that idea remained as much aspiration as did the Arab state imagined by Sharif Hussein. All these movements dedicated to transforming language and religion into ideology complicated the Iraqi effort to construct a nation-state. Some Arabs saw their destiny as linked to other Arabs. Kurds sought support and defense from other Kurds. Arab Shia necessarily felt identity with Persian Shia next door in Iran; yet important segments, perhaps majorities, of all these groups also identified with

the Iraqi state and its uniqueness. All these cross-border linkages, deemed natural and essential by some parts of the population, threatened others.³¹ The Iranian support for the Iraqi government and its effort to expunge the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was only a further instance. The militias supported by Iran were vital to the fight against ISIS—and a threat for disaffected Arab Sunnis.

Algeria

The case of Algeria further illustrates the disruptive potential of Arabism and Islamism. Both surfaced in the 1930s in the Association of Reformist Ulama headed by a scholar (alim) named Abdel Hamid Ben Badis. The association founded schools to revive the teaching of Arabic and championed a puritanical version of Islam critical of Sufi organizations and local saint cultures and of the dominant Sunni establishment controlled by French appointment and approval. A significant number of Algerians, almost as many as sought university education in France, studied at the Zitouna mosque in Tunis before independence.³² They constituted a core of support for Arabism and Islamism. But the revolution came out of a different movement, the Populist Party of Algeria (PPA), headed by a long-time supporter of the French Communist Party, Messali Hadj. While the French accused Egypt of fomenting the revolt in Algeria, the revolutionaries of the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN) complained that President Nasir offered them little in the way of support. Neither pan-Arabism nor pan-Islam accounts for the Algerian revolution.

It was surprising, then, that the first president of independent Algeria, Ahmed Ben Bella, declared Algeria an Arab and Muslim state. While the constitution confirmed that orientation, Ben Bella did little to implement this new strategic campaign to alter national identity during his three years in power. (At a meeting of Arab states in Iraq, Ben Bella was apparently embarrassed that his delegation could not function in formal Arabic.)³³ In contrast, Houari Boumediene, who overthrew

Ben Bella in 1965 and assumed the presidency, launched a vigorous campaign to make Arabic the primary language of the country, even though there were few Algerians capable of teaching it. Algeria brought one thousand Egyptians to Algeria to help launch Arabic in elementary and secondary schools, many of them untrained as teachers and none of them familiar with Algerian Arabic or Berber dialects, which were the most commonly languages spoken in the country. What is more, many of the Egyptians invited to teach in Algeria were members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was at that moment an illegal, underground organization in Egypt accused of trying to assassinate President Nasir. Benrabah writes: “This is how Islamic fundamentalism was first introduced in Algeria at a large scale.”³⁴

Boumediene hoped that Arabic would come to replace the role of French in Algeria as the language of government, business, and education. The motives were clearly political: to break definitively with the colonial heritage and frustrate any future French efforts at cultural imperialism; to enhance the legitimacy of the government with commitment to Islam, now that most Christians and Jews had fled; to elevate the importance of Algeria by associating it with other Arabic-speaking, Muslim states; and to join other Arab states in their resistance to Israel. The petroleum resources of Algeria permitted rapid progress with schools and literacy. Algeria moved from 70 to 80 per cent illiteracy at independence to perhaps 70 per cent literacy by 2010, mostly in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).³⁵ Presidents Boumediene and his successor Chadli Benjedid took care to address their fellow citizens in MSA rather than French or Algerian Arabic.

The ministries of Justice, Religious Affairs, and to a lesser extent Education managed to Arabize their operations, as did town registries,³⁶ but the French language never lost its importance even in elementary education. The military and civilian elites, while pushing Arabic at all levels, continued to send their own progeny to French language schools at every level. Benrabah writes that

elites “have failed to promote Literary Arabic as an attractive ‘product’ to which a high ‘value’ would be assigned on the Algerian ‘linguistic market.’”³⁷ The French language continued to be vital in the oil industry, commerce, government and science. While Algeria began to offer English as an alternative second language in the middle schools and beyond, families opted overwhelmingly for French rather than English as an avenue to the rest of the world. In a poll of 8,000 young Algerians conducted in 2004, three fifths of the respondents said they spoke French compared with 15% for English.³⁸

The companion piece of the drive for Arabization was Islamization. Ulama from the Islamic reform movement, inheritors of the reformist tradition initiated by Ben Badis, became protagonists of Arabization and occupants of the most prestigious, government-supported religious institutions in the country. In that role, they sought to move Algeria toward a single, government-supported version of Islam, hostile to the Sufi orders and saint cultures that had suffered during the revolution. Most of the village meeting places (*zawaya*) that served these popular religious causes had been destroyed in the hostilities, suspected by the French of harboring rebels and by the revolutionaries of collaborating with the French. The regime organized “seminars” about Islam, which turned out to be propaganda sessions for the reformist viewpoint, not intellectual explorations of Islamic history and practice, as some participants hoped and imagined they would be.³⁹ The regime’s goal was to make Algeria uniformly Arab and Muslim.

The costs of this heavy-handed effort to remake religious culture became apparent after 1980. A protest movement that came to be known as the “Berber Spring” served as a wakeup call. Berbers felt they were taking a double hit. They felt disadvantaged in the process of Arabization, starting as they did from dialects predating the Arab conquest. Many Berbers spoke colloquial Arabic as a convenience, but they had also invested heavily in French education. Moreover, the

effort to impose a single, government-sponsored version of Islam seemed directed at the Berber regions, and especially the Kabylia region east of Algiers, where villagers had long been active in Sufi organizations and local saint cultures. President Bendjedid looked with favor on the growth of an Islamist movement, partly as a shield against leftist critiques, much as had President Sadat in Egypt. Berbers saw the growth of Islamism as a serious threat to their well-being in Algeria.

Since independence, the military has governed Algeria directly or indirectly. Ahmed Ben Bella became the first president with the support of the commander of the external military forces, Houari Boumediene, who three years later took power himself in a coup d'état. President Bendjedid also came out of the military, but he did not enjoy Boumediene's breadth of military support. To bolster his position he cultivated Islamist groups and then, after riots in 1987, began to open the political system to competition for the single party, the FLN. In municipal elections and then in the first round of parliamentary elections, an Islamist party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), made a strong showing. The FIS threatened to take a majority of seats in parliament in the second round of elections in January 1990, but the military removed Bendjedid from power, annulled those elections, and moved the country toward civil war with Islamist forces. Initially frustrated in its efforts to regain control of the country, the military retooled and eventually defeated the Islamists in a battle that produced an estimated 100,000 deaths.

The politicization of Arabic undertaken by Ben Bella and Boumediene, pursued by Bendjedid, and bolstered consistently by the security apparatus of independent Algeria, deserve much of the blame for creating the conditions for this civil war. The military replaced President Bendjedid with a hero of the revolution, Mohamed Boudiaf, whom they summoned from exile. He had strong popular appeal, which he cultivated by speaking publicly in Algerian Arabic!⁴⁰ He was apparently too popular for the taste of the military. Most analysts agree that the Algerian security

apparatus assassinated Boudiaf after only months in office, perhaps because he represented a threat to military dominance. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who served as foreign minister under President Boumediene, took power thanks to military support, but he moved toward new policies on language and religion.⁴¹ He spoke French in public, breaking with the tradition of previous presidents, took steps to accommodate Berber demands, and seemingly ended the campaigns against popular Islam (Sufism and saint cultures). Villages in the Kabylia are rebuilding *zawaya* as civic and religious gathering places.⁴² By forcing the resignation of the ailing Bouteflika in the spring of 2019, in response to public protests, the regime still appeared reluctant to satisfy the demands for genuinely competitive elections. It did seem that the regime had moved toward acceptance of a Arab Muslim society that is nonetheless multilingual: Modern Standard Arabic, French, and some Tamazight (Berber) in written form; Algerian Arabic and versions of Tamazight are the ordinary spoken languages of most people. In a survey of 1044 Algerians, 79% reported speaking Algerian Arabic at home; 16% said they spoke a Berber dialect. Three per cent reported speaking Arabic (presumably MSA) and two per cent said they spoke French.⁴³ [Figures 1 and 2 about here.]

Language preference appears to have political significance in Algeria, dividing the Arabophones from Berberophones. A survey done in December 2012 and January 2013 turned up differences. For example, the 15% of the sample reporting that they speak a Berber dialect at home rated slightly higher on the scale of secular and emancipative values than those whose home language is Algerian Arabic—the values that modernization theorists link with democratization.⁴⁴ And Berbers reported somewhat greater satisfaction with their lives (Figure 1). The Amazigh (Berbers) were more likely than Arabs to “strongly agree” with the statement: “I see myself as part of the Algerian nation” (71% vs. 63%) but slightly less like to report that they are “very proud of their country” (48% vs. 62%) (Figure 2). Without efforts to control for geographic, social, and

economic variables, it is not possible to assert that language preference accounts for these small differences in attitude.

Only consideration of French policies in Algeria and nationalist response to those policies can account for the fact that language became and remains a political issue. The French conquest overturned Ottoman government of a rather narrow strip of the country and sent the Turkish-speaking elite fleeing toward Istanbul. As the conquest proceeded into the hinterland, it pulled together tribes and groups with several different Berber dialects. Besides the Kabyles there were the Shawia of the Aures mountain region, and the Tuareg of the far south, who used, Tifinagh, the alphabet that has become the choice of Berbers in Morocco and Algeria for teaching and writing the language. The urban areas tended to speak a colloquial version of Arabic. The religious practices were scarcely uniform either. The act of pulling these diverse cultures into a single political entity created enduring frictions.

Then came the nationalist movement with its aspiration to undo the work of the French by ridding the country of the French language and purify the religion it believed the French had undermined and corrupted. The nationalists sought the sort of uniformity and authenticity they thought a modern nation-state required. In that effort they were effectively following the French colonial example in reverse. With the legitimacy acquired during the revolution and the police power now at their disposal, they were able to make some progress toward uniformity, but their success with Islamization reinforced the efforts of radical Islamist groups, and their push for Arabization provoked the anger of Berbers. Success did not result in uniformity, and authenticity came to assume a broader, richer meaning than the nationalists envisioned, as Judith Scheele has shown so effectively.⁴⁵ The Bouteflika presidency introduced an understanding of Algerian identity that sought to downplay all three watchwords of early independence: Arabism, Islamism, and socialism.

Iran

No country in the modern Middle East and North Africa has been more ambitious in attempting cultural transformation than Iran. The revolution of 1978–79 brought to power a regime intent on saving the Iranian people from the corruptions of imperialism and modernity and leading them toward a new level of Shiite religiosity and morality. While the new Islamic regime opposed nationalism as divisive of the Islamic community, its actions since the revolution, whether making war against Iraq, or asserting its authority in the Gulf, appear very much consistent with nationalist aspirations. Legitimacy of the regime comes not from God alone but from a people resisting the sort of false nationalism disguised by imperial control. It is not Iran's devotion to Shiism that created this regime; it is the regime that is seeking to remake Shiism to serve its political purposes.

Taking control of much of contemporary Iranian territory in 1500, the Safavid family

decided to embrace Shiism as a state religion. To do so it needed to import knowledgeable clerics in the way the Algerians needed to import teachers of Arabic in the 1960s. Neither the Safavid regime (1501 to 1729) nor the Qajar regime that followed after an interregnum, managed to make Persia into a uniformly Shiite state. These empires had somewhat approximate control of the tribal cultures that populated the periphery of Iran. Only the core was both Persian speaking and Shiite. Today Iran is 99 percent Muslim and 90 per cent Shiite Muslim but only two-thirds Persian speaking. Neither the dynasty that seized power in Persia after World War I nor the current Islamic Republic has sought to create linguistic uniformity, but as elsewhere, the effort to make Iran into a modern nation-state meant subduing the peripheral tribal groups and creating tensions in the process.

A tall, strapping Reza Khan emerged from the Cossack Brigade in the 1920s to take power in Persia, change the name of the country to Iran, and proclaim himself shah (king). He then proceeded to use military force to disarm the tribes, assert central control, and embark on a program of modernization that included infrastructure and communications. A great admirer of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, he subscribed to the Turkish idea that Islam stood in the way of change. He was, however, less successful than Atatürk in bringing the religious establishment under government supervision, partly because of a hierarchy among the Shiite clerics that was missing in Sunni countries—a hierarchy that enabled resistance—and partly because endowments and believer contributions enabled the religious establishment in Iran to maintain considerable degree of autonomy.

Reza Shah saw himself as a nationalist, opposed to both Russian incursion from the north and British influence in the south, committed to modernization as were the new Arab states and the Turks but without their problems of language and religion. Imperialism had not sought to replace the Persian language, and Islam did not restrict the evolution of Persian as it did with sacred Arabic.

In Iran, the vernacular did not differ sharply from the written language as it did in the Ottoman Empire and as it does in the contemporary Arab world. While versions of Persian were spoken in neighboring countries, such as Afghanistan, Reza Shah did not attempt to go beyond the borders established by the Safavid and then the Qajar dynasties. He sought to defend those borders against outsiders even when three powers—Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union—wanted to ship supplies across his territory during World War II. Those states deposed him and replaced him with his son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. The son, like father, continued to alienate religious authorities with his secularizing policies, but language was not as major issue, though there was a move to purify it of its heavy reliance on Arabic vocabulary. Written in a modified Arabic script, and with many words of Arab origin, Persian remains the primary language of the country; Turkish dialects, spoken widely in the northwestern corner of the country, constitute the second language; Kurdish is the third language group.

For Iran, the relationship with Kurdish speakers of the northwest mountains has gone from one of alliance and support under Muhammad Reza Pahlavi to one of measured hostility under the Islamic Republic. The late shah provided a refuge as well as military support for Iraqi Kurds fighting the Iraqi government in the 1970s. By supporting the Kurdish revolt, the shah forced the Iraqi regime under Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein to accept a peace treaty with Iran which they found repugnant: agreement on the boundary between the two countries in the Shatt al-Arab, which is the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and cession of three islands in the Gulf. The change of regime in Iran turned the Kurds from allies into trouble makers. The Islamic Republic emphasized Shiism to a much greater degree than had the old regime, which put the predominantly Sunni Kurds in a more difficult situation. Moreover, engaged in a long war with Iraq, the Islamic Republic suspected Kurds of disloyalty as did the Iraqis on the other side. Iranian ambivalence

toward the Kurds continued after the establishment of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq in the 1990s and the nurturing of an autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan after the U.S. conquest of Iraq in 2003. Both Turkey and Iran see the possibility of an independent Kurdistan as a threat to their borders. While the borders do not follow language or religion, the conflict over the Kurdish region comes primarily from nationalisms of five sorts: Kurdish, Turkish, Iraqi, Syrian, and Iranian. While the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) did project a Kurdish state, Kurds were at that moment a set of tribes more than they were a people united by language and conscious of their common identity.⁴⁶ What is more, the creation of a state encompassing all Kurds would have meant taking territory from Iran as well as from territories of the collapsed Ottoman Empire. Kurdish nationalism developed within and in resistance to the other four nationalisms in the region, each of them defined in some measure by language and ethnicity: Arab, Turkish, or Persian. Political divisions between two major parties within Iraqi Kurdistan devolved into outright warfare at certain junctures, complicating the regional relationship with Baghdad and inviting foreign intervention to help one party or the other. The current autonomy within Iraq of the Kurdish region has produced internal security and prosperity but not eliminated tensions with the central government over issues such as control of Kirkuk. Still, that relationship appears healthier than that of Kurds to the Turkish government, or Kurds to the Syrian government, or Kurds to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The constitution of the Islamic Republic offers explicit guarantees of tolerance for peoples of the Book, of whom there are few in Iran: Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians. Sunni Muslims are not viewed as a minority, although they may not feel fully empowered in the Shiite state. Toleration does not extend to Bahais, who believe that God sent additional messengers to Iran in apparent contradiction with the Quranic proclamation of Muhammad as the last of the messengers or prophets. The pursuit and persecution of Bahais began soon after the emergence of the faith in

1859, thanks to the proclamations and denunciations by the Shiite clerics. Far from renouncing persecution of the group, the Islamic Republic has sustained the policy of pursuing and punishing Bahais with prison, death, or deprivation of rights and privileges such as education. Non-Muslims constitute less than one per cent of the Iranian population. [Figure 3 about here.]

Has the Islamic Republic achieved transformation of the morals and social behavior in Iran? Altering the language was not an objective. The Iranian Constitution does, however, commit the Islamic Republic to increasing the religiosity and morality of the country and to fighting the secularism, corruption, and materialism of the old regime. Surveys of the Iranian population in 2000, 2005, and again in 2020 provide only indirect evidence on this question.⁴⁷ By several measures of religiosity—such as reported frequency of attendance at religious services, reported frequency of prayer, identification of self as a religious person—Iran looks about as religious as several other Muslim countries in the region. On an index of secular values based on a combination of questions, Iranian respondents rank above the mean, more secular than Qatar, Egypt, Morocco, and Libya, but distinctly less secular than some countries, such as Algeria, Jordan and Lebanon.⁴⁸ Iranians stand out, though, for their endorsement of a political system “governed by religious law in which there are no political parties or elections,” even though the Islamic Republic forbids parties but uses elections. In a survey conducted in 2020, 78% of Iranian respondents pronounced such a system as “very good” or “fairly good,” while 96% of those same respondents used those positive terms for a political system based in democratic principles. (See Figure 3.) Both sets of responses set Iranians apart from those in other countries included in Wave 7 of the World Values Survey.

There can be little doubt that many cultural practices in Iran have changed under the Islamic Republic. Many studies of Iran testify to changes in behavior, many of them adaptations to the rules of the new regime. The changes in women’s dress are notable. Adelkhah reports a cult of physical

fitness.⁴⁹ Feminism has taken on new and different meanings, such as study groups and attention to rights of women within the Iranian code, which now incorporates elements of the Sharia. But Pardis Mahdavi's *Passionate Uprisings* casts doubt on the notion that materialism has disappeared or that the regime's campaign for modesty and morality have been entirely successful.⁵⁰ The success at the polls of President Khatami (1997–2005) and of President Rouhani (2013–2021) suggest broad opposition to the sort of discipline the regime has imposed on the society in the name of religious morality. Critics of the regime think that corruption still plays an important part in decision-making, even though corruption was an important grievance against the old regime. Making religion a matter of civic necessity, posting the pictures of religious leaders everywhere, reproducing the Quran in great volume and low cost, enforcing dress codes on young and old alike, making “fun” into a state offense—all these actions tend to politicize Islam and undermine the moral purposes proclaimed by the regime.

The Iranian regime resembles others in the region for its deep underlying ambivalence about cultural identities. By the theory expounded by its founder, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the institutions of the Islamic Republic reflect traditional Shiite thinking about the problem of leadership in the absence of the hidden imam. The form of government is said to be “Islamic” even though it includes many elected officials. Leadership evokes tradition by its dress and by constant evocation of righteousness, reference to Hussein ibn Ali's martyrdom in 680, the construction of mosques, the prohibitions on homosexuality, alcohol and drugs, the legal codification and enforcement of parts of the Sharia, and much more. In all these ways it has in fact assaulted the habits and practices of Iranian society as they had evolved before the revolution. It invokes historic Shiism to transform the traditional practices of Muslims in Iran and the surrounding area. The regime recreates the meaning of Shiite Islam with its every action, and this affects every Muslim, Shiite or not, in the region. Sunni

states on the western side of the Gulf feel threatened.

Lebanon

Turkey, Israel, Iran, Algeria, and Iraq before 1990 are five examples of strong governments that have sought to establish or revise their national identities by the manipulation of language and/or religion. In contrast, the Lebanese government has never had sufficient authority to attempt such an action. The principal reason is the construction of a political system built upon confessional categories as unalterable parameters—a system long praised for maintaining peace in a country riven by linguistic and religious differences and then blamed for the decline of the country into civil war between 1975 and 1990. With slight revision of the system at the end of the war, Lebanon again appeared healthy in comparison with some of its neighbors such as Syria, but the central question had not been resolved: what does it mean to be simply Lebanese rather a Lebanese member of a confessional category? Does the stability of Lebanon depend upon the creation of a national identity? Imperialism played a part in this problem, as it did in so many others. Assuming the mandate for Syria at the end of World War I, France acknowledged British control of Palestine, a territory long regarded as part of an area known as Syria, and then split a part of what remained of Greater Syria into a separate called Lebanon. France had intervened in the 1860s to defend Roman Catholics (Maronite Christians), many of them descendants of French Crusader communities, when the Ottomans enjoyed sovereignty over these territories. The borders the French established for Lebanon left the Maronites with an apparent plurality and Christians (including Greek Orthodox, Armenians, and others) with a possible majority over and against the Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, and the post-Islamic Druse. Under Ottoman rule these confessional groups had enjoyed some religious autonomy in the much larger empire. Once under French rule, the arena was much smaller, and the French forced consultation and collaboration in preparation for independence. Such was the

origin of the National Pact of 1944.

What emerged was democratic in form but limited in effectiveness. The primary agreement was about what should not be done. Although the primary language was a dialect of Arabic, mother tongue for all except Kurds and Armenians, the country should not align itself with the Arab world, as Muslims wished, nor should it continue to associate with France and Europe, as the Maronite Christians wanted. (In the mandate period from 1920 to 1943, French had become the preferred language of most Christians and many Muslims.⁵¹) By allocating seats in the legislature according to confessional groups—giving the Christians a six-to-five advantage over Muslims—the National Pact insured governmental weakness. That is, the system made it difficult for political parties to reach across confessional groups and sustain a parliamentary majority sufficient to govern the country. The Pact mandated that the president be Christian, the prime minister be Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the parliament be Shiite Muslim. Those restrictions further constricted the choices of voters and politicians.

What is most significant about the National Pact is that it politicized these groupings and rigidified the hierarchy of leadership within each of them, freeing the political elites from competing across sectarian divisions. The National Pact treated these divisions as if they were ineradicable; even today they loom as obstructions to the creation of a strong, unified nation. Because Lebanon changed leadership via elections rather than by coup d'état, unlike Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, it was the most democratic Arab country in the region after the French departure, but it also suffered from the weakness of the state and a limited capacity for decision making under the constitution that followed the National Pact.

Two factors caused the crash of this fragile system based on the results of a census taken in 1933. The first was the independence of Israel to the south, which occasioned an influx of

Palestinian refugees that Lebanon was never willing or able to integrate, and the second was the politicization of a growing Shiite Muslim population. The system could not adapt to these new realities. Christians and Muslims tended to divide on the Israel/Palestine issue, and on the justice or injustice of the National Pact once “everyone knew” (without a fresh census) that Muslims had become the majority in the country. Two Israeli invasions and a civil war led finally to a modest revision of the National Pact: an agreement achieved in 1989 at Taif in Saudi Arabia provided that the new ratio would be 50--50 in the Parliament and that the Prime Minister, still a Sunni Muslim, would become the chief executive. The president, a Maronite, would be the head of state in the normal pattern of parliamentary politics. The formula worked and the country returned to relative stability with its thin form of democracy, only to suffer further from Syrian interference and then the chaos that followed an uprising in Syria during the Arab Spring of 2011. The search continues for symbols, slogans, practices, museums, ceremonies---anything that would unify the nation-state. As elsewhere, that search involves historical memory and mythmaking. Interpreting modern Lebanon as an inheritor of the Phoenician past is one example. Arguing that the Lebanese dialect is a language distinct from formal Arabic is another. If language were the distinctive common bond, as classic nationalist theory would have it, ties to France and the Arab world would be reduced in importance.⁵² The implausibility of this suggestion stems in part from Beirut’s role in the printing of Arabic-language materials including those of a pan-Arab publishing house called the Arab Studies Center. That Lebanon could somehow withdraw into the local vernacular and disentangle itself from international pressures seems wildly unrealistic, whether or not local speech is a distinctive mark of the country.

The Lebanese example shows once again that cultural diversity affects but does not determine political outcomes. It reflects the decisions of past generations and sets parameters for

choices in the present. The cultural categories created by imperial decisions about Lebanon made that country a seductive, cosmopolitan place in a region where many states pursue a goal of cultural uniformity; sectarianism in Lebanon also fostered weak institutions vulnerable to breakdown when challenged by demographic and environmental change. Revived and reformed, these same institutions now struggle to restore and enhance the sort of existence that appeared to be hopelessly lost only thirty years ago. Lebanon's weakness is also an advantage. Its government lacks the will or the capacity to impose cultural uniformity in the name of nationalism. The potential consequences of such a project are patently obvious in Lebanon; in other countries, the divisive consequences of cultural nationalism may be easier to overlook. (Table 2 about here.)

Conclusion

Language and religion are not the only, or even the most important, aspects of culture in the MENA. The whole of the Mediterranean region is said to share a culture of cuisine that depends heavily on the olive and the sea. The societies around the Mediterranean all struggle with a long heritage of male dominance and its consequences, such as honor killings. Each country contains not one but a variety of cultural categories, the most notable division being the one Ibn Khaldun identified as critical in the fourteenth century: nomadism vs. settled peoples. Nomadism has largely disappeared, but the distinction between rural and urban cultures remains important. Egyptians in the Western desert are more likely to see tribe and kinship as important than compatriots living in the Nile valley. The cultures of two cities in the same country, such as Istanbul and Ankara, can be notably different. Two neighborhoods in the same city, sometimes separated by only a major thoroughfare and a large gap in economic well-being, can exhibit sharply different cultural characteristics in any of these countries, or in any other. Understanding all these cultural differences can be important to political analysis; governments, local and international, recognize them and

often try to soften, change, or otherwise modify them. However much they may resist change, they can scarcely be seen as immutable.

There is something to be said for seeing language and religion as primordial. Everywhere they are deeply rooted in history. People do not readily shift religious beliefs or abandon maternal tongues, but the significance and political relevance of their choices is variable, as can be seen by looking at even a century or two of history. The Ottoman and Safavid/Qajar dynasties imparted a set of meanings to languages and religions in the area. The advent of European imperialism disrupted political arrangements and changed the significance of language and religion across the region. And then the emergence of nationalist governments, bent on cementing their legitimacy by invoking language as a unifying factor and/or religion as the basis of national identity, further transformed the cultures of the region. What is more, these governments provoked opposition, especially Islamist opposition, that further altered the meaning of what it meant to be a Muslim. Language minorities (Kurds, Amazigh) also responded to cultural discrimination by coming together as modern groups, parties, and militias to defend themselves and pursue their political interests. As Benrabah has observed about Algeria, “The Islamic orientation of children’s instruction has produced a whole generation of school-leavers and students who value religious beliefs and Islam more than the Arabic language.”⁵³

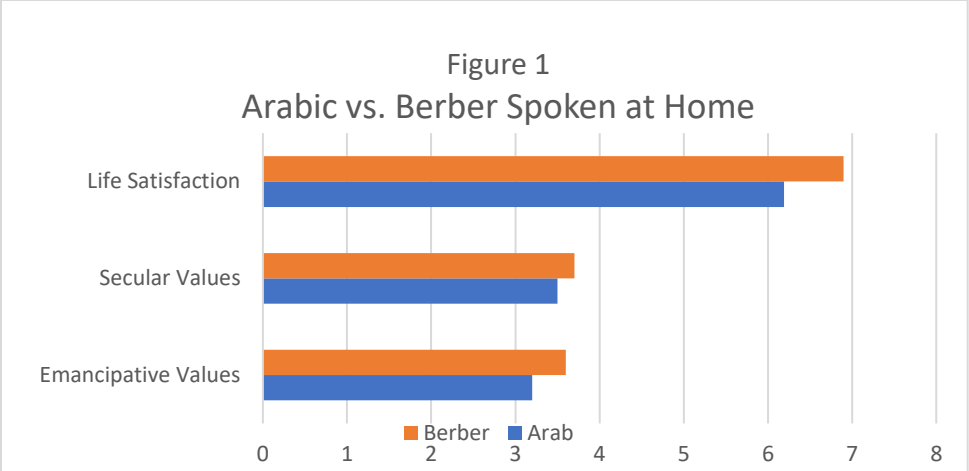
The practice of language has changed in many individual countries. The vast expansion of primary and secondary education has expanded literacy in Modern Standard Arabic. The spread of English in international commerce has affected all countries. Decisions to teach some Tamazight Morocco and Algeria have begun to have an impact. Language usage evolves constantly, but it is the meaning of language practices that differ most from place to place and time to time. At least until recently, speaking French in Tunisia has had a different meaning than it does in Algeria or, for that

matter, in Morocco. The significance of French changed from the colonial period to early independence, and now has evolved once again. Everywhere language tends to indicate social origins, and significance thus changes as social hierarchies evolve. Material circumstances affect practices but also affect meanings directly.

It is perhaps even easier to see how religion continues to shape politics, though *not* because Muslims are necessarily different from Christians and Jews or because major conflicts can be explained by these enormous categories. Religion shapes politics because many governments in the area use it as an ideological tool to reinforce nationalism and/or to shape morals and mores in their countries. Monarchs claim religious authority, and republics such as Iran and Israel cite religion as a primary factor in national solidarity. But oppositional forces, mostly Islamist movements, on elements of Islam to forge their own ideologies and push the state in one of several directions, as Salwa Ismail demonstrates in the case of Egypt.⁵⁴ These movements claim to reflect Islam---the original Islam, the true Islam---invoking practices and discourse that is familiar to Muslims everywhere. In squeezing new meanings from a discourse they incite response and stir change in society; the re-veiling movement across the Muslim world is one example.

Language and religion have been politicized to some degree almost everywhere in the region in the name of solidifying national identity. The negative consequences of the politics of identity, such as civil war in Algeria, stalemate in Lebanon, ethnic conflict in Turkey, instability in Iraq, cultural confrontation in Iran, standoff in Israel/Palestine, appear to outweigh any benefits one might assign to the politicization of culture.

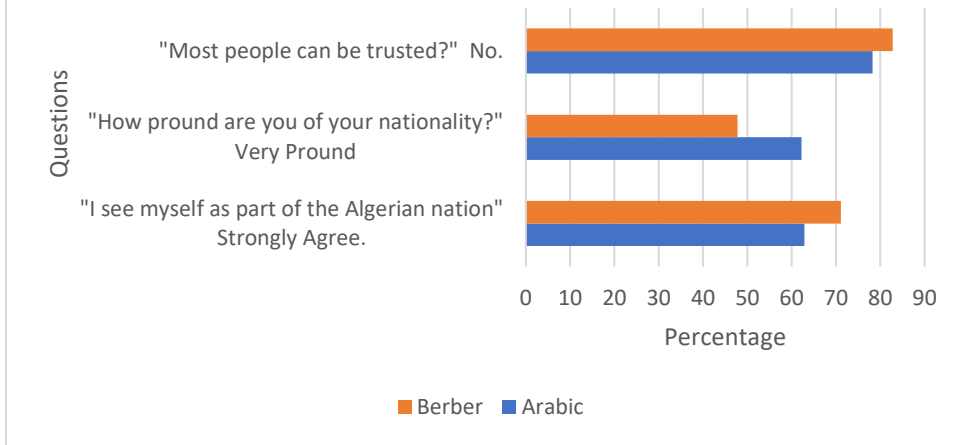
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Indexes for Secular and emancipative values range from 0.0 to 1.0, rendered here as 0 to 10.

Question about life satisfaction asked respondents to rate their satisfaction with life on a scale of 0 to 10. The figure includes 960 respondents say they speak Algerian Arabic at home, and 180 respondents who say they speak Tamazigh (Berber) at home. Excluded are respondents who report speaking "Arabic" (37) and or French (20) at home. Source: World Values Survey, Wave 6, 2010-2014.

Figure 2
Arabic vs. Berber Spoken at Home



Respondents included here are the same as those for Figure 1.

Source: World Values Survey, Wave 6, 2010-2014.

Figure 3
Religious Law or Democratic Governance?

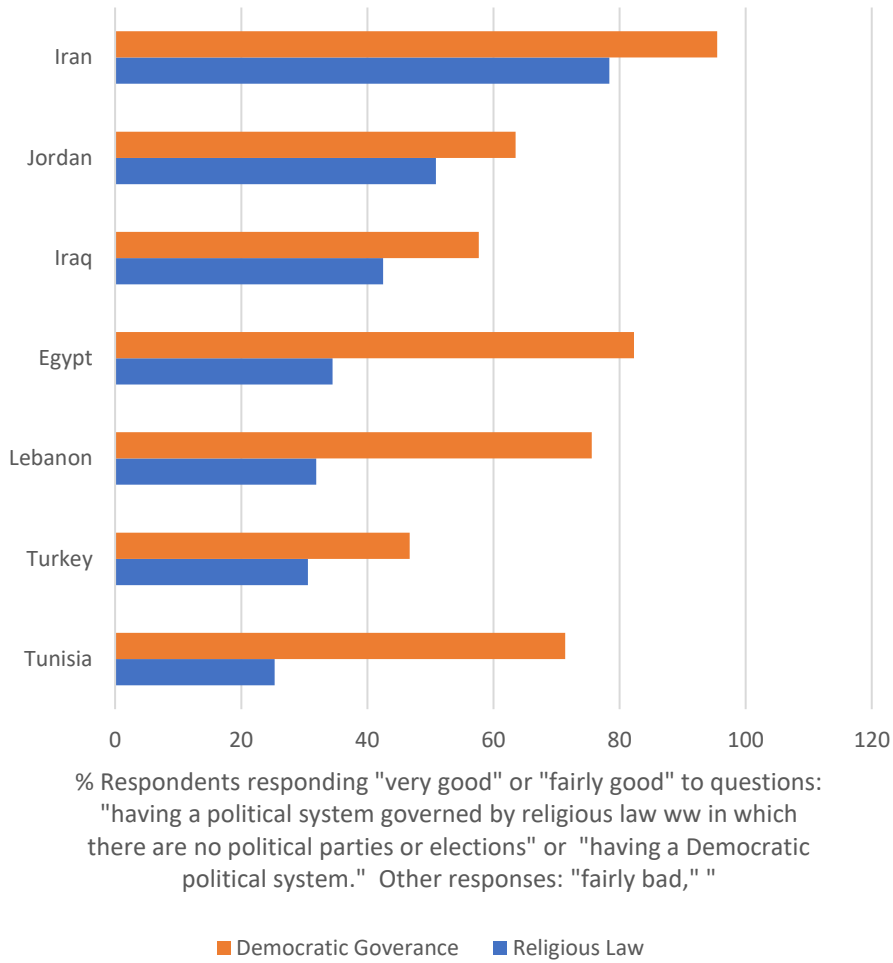


Table 1 Efforts of National Governments to Reshape Language and/or Religion

	Turkey	Israel	Algeria	Iran	Iraq	Lebanon
Imperialism	Ottoman Empire	British mandate	French occupation	British, Russian influence	British mandate	French mandate
Language change under national government	Switch to Roman alphabet, vernacular Turkish	Promotion of Hebrew in place of Yiddish, other languages	Campaign for literacy in classical Arabic as opposed to French.	No effort to reduce language diversity	Promotion of classical Arabic under mandate, monarchy, then; Baathism	Use of French linked to confessional group.
Effort to reshape religion	Radical secularism; creation of “Turkish Islam”	Accommodation of Orthodoxy in institutions of state	Campaign for Arabic linked to rise of Islamism. Politization of religion, violence in the 1990s	Revolution brought promotion of Islam, reversal of secularizing trend	American invasion brought Shiite clerics to the fore; Sunni Islamism in resistance	Change came from growth in Shiite group, tipping confessional system toward Muslims.
Current trend	Islamizing tendency under Justice and Development Party	Growth in influence of religious parties, idea of Jewish state	Pull back from Islamism, greater tolerance for religious diversity	Softening of the Islamizing drive as revolution hits age 30?	Kurds, Arab Shiites brought into the system once dominated by Arab Sunnis	Shiite influence still on increase (Hezbollah) but Taif agreement holds

NOTES

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 2. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
 3. Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 7.
 4. Daniel Crecelius, *The Ulama and the State in Modern Egypt* (Microfilm: Princeton, N. J., 1976).
 5. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.
 6. Yasir Suleiman, *A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 67-71.
 7. Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work*, 6.
 8. Mohamed Benrabah, *Language Conflict in Algeria: From Colonialism to Post-Independence* (Bristol, U. K.: Multilingual Matters, 2013), 24.
 9. Mohamed Benrabah, "Language maintenance and spread: French in Algeria," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 10:1&2 (2007), 205.
 10. Benrabah, *Language Conflict in Algeria*, 34.
 11. Mohamed Benrabah, "Language maintenance and spread," 194.
 12. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 75.
 13. See George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1946).
 14. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006).

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15. See Laura Robson, *States of Separation* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).
 16. Carolin Liebisch-Gümüş, “Embedded Turkification: Nation Building and Violence within the Framework of the League of Nations 1919-1937.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 52: 239..
 17. Ummut Azak, “Secularism in Turkey as a Nationalist Search for Vernacular Islam: Ban on the Call to Prayer in Arabic,” *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 124, 161-179.
 18. See Chapter 5, “Muslim Communism,” in M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.)
 19. Johann Strauss, “Modernisation, nationalisation, déislamisation: la transformation du turc aux XIXe-XXe siècles,” *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 124, 135-139.
 20. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, p. 231.
 21. Umut Uzer, *An Intellectual History of Turkish Nationalism: Between Turkish Ethnicity and Islamic identity* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2016).
 22. Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989); Sükran Vahide, *Islam in modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).
 23. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
 24. Yasir Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), Chap. 4.
 25. See Liora Halperin, *Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920-1948* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
 26. Yasir Suleiman, *A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Chap. 5.
 27. Sati al-Husri, *The Day of Maysalun; A Page from the Modern History of the Arabs*, trans. Sidney Glazer

(Washington: Middle East Institute, 1966).

28. Yasir Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and National Identity*, Chap. 5.

29. See Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

30. Phebe Marr with Ibrahim al-Marashi, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview, 2017).

31. Gregory Gause sees these cross-national ties as the most critical threats to the stability of the Gulf region as a security area. F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

32. James McDougall, "Dream of Exile, Promise of Home: Language, Education, and Arabism in Algeria," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 43 (2011), 255.

33. Farida Abu-Haidar, "Arabisation in Algeria," *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 3:3 (2000), 155.

34. Benrabah, "Language and Politics in Algeria," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 10:59-78 (2004), 65.

35. Fawzi Abdulrazak, "Arabization in Algeria," *MELA Notes*, 26 (1982), 28; Benrabah puts the illiteracy rate at independence at 90% and at about 70% in 2010. "Competition between four 'world' languages in Algeria," *Journal of World Languages*, 1:1, 46, 50.

36. Benrabah, "Language Maintenance," 195.

37. Benrabah, "Language maintenance," 207.

38. Abu-Haidar, "Arabisation in Algeria," 159.

39. The late Mohamed Arkoun, native of Kabylia and distinguished Islamicist at the Sorbonne, accepted the state's invitation to participate in one or more of those seminars. He pronounced them repugnant in their narrow-mindedness. Private conversation.

40. Farida Abu-Haidar, "Arabisation in Algeria," 159.

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41. Benrabah, *Language Conflict*, 83.
42. Judith Scheele, "Recycling Baraka: Knowledge, Politics, and Religion in Contemporary Algeria," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49:2 (2007) 304–328.
43. World Values Survey, Wave 6: 2010-2014.
44. See Chapter 5 for discussion of discussion of modernization theory and work of Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel.
45. Scheele, "Recycling Baraka."
46. Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005.)
47. World Values Survey, Waves Four (1999-2004) and Five (2006-2009), online analysis.
48. That observation is based on a table included in Chapter 5.
49. Fariba Adelkhah, *Being Modern in Iran*, trans. Jonathan Derrick (New York: Columbia, 2000).
50. Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).
51. Yasir Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 206; David C. Gordon, "The Arabic Language and National Identity: The Cases of Algeria and of Lebanon," in *Language Policy and National Unity*, William R. Beer and James E. Jacob, eds. (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), 142.
52. Franck Salameh, *Language, Memory and Identity in the Middle East: The Case for Lebanon* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010).
53. Benrabah, "Language and Politics," 72.
54. Salwa Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006.)