

## Chapter 6

### The Prominence and Perversity of Identity Politics

L. Carl Brown has argued that the Middle East is the region of the globe most thoroughly penetrated by foreign influence since the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> No domestic issue lacks international ramifications, and no international move is without implications for the domestic politics of states in the region. That is one reason the politics of the region have been deeply affected by cultural issues. European invasion of the Ottoman Empire brought a sharp perception of cultural difference, and the responding effort of the Ottomans to implement elements of European culture initiated a period in which culture became a component of almost every idea and every action. Rare today is the political issue in that region, whether it is war in the Yemen, women's rights in Morocco, conflict in Turkey, or Iran's position in the international arena, that does not have cultural ramifications of one sort or another.

The preceding chapters give evidence of the extent to which aspects of culture have been politicized in the region. Europeans invented the notion of culture as a mode of understanding difference in the non-European world and turned it into a rationale for domination. Orientalism posited a conception of European culture---rational, secular, and superior---and fashioned a portrait of Muslim culture as a whole---mystical, religious, and backward--- that came to have repercussions across the region. The repercussions ranged from acknowledgement of European superiority and a desperate effort to imitate European mores to resistance in the form of Islamic revival and pan-Arab nationalism.

However, the power of Europe lay not with unified action but in the military and economic strength of its nation-states. In competition with each other, they were the perpetrators of intervention in the Middle East and North Africa. The imperialist powers brought with them the

idea that nations achieve their identity from cultural affinities such as language, an idea that threatened multicultural empires such as the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman, and the Persian. The English, French, and American examples also introduced the idea of a nation based in equal citizenship, which was a concept unfamiliar to the empires of the age. Egypt under Muhammad Ali set out to make itself a nation on the European model, weakening the Ottoman Empire in the process, and at the same time prodding the Empire itself to follow the European model. The Europeans for their part, by pushing that model and supporting cultural minorities they thought were mistreated by the Ottomans, hastened the empire's collapse.

It is not true, of course, that the region suddenly became more diverse in religion and ethnicity. The Ottoman Empire itself became somewhat less diverse and more Muslim as it lost territory in the European provinces that were predominantly Christian. But as a result of European pressures and examples, the cultivation of ethnic and religious identities became a promising avenue for political advancement. Cultural categories came to have new meaning. The French in Algeria chose to treat those who spoke Berber dialects differently from those who spoke the more prevalent Arabic vernacular, for example. Kurds began to think of themselves as a group that could aspire to statehood. Arabs began to modernize the classical language and re-imagine themselves as a people.

The heightened importance of cultural identities affected much of the region after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, but the initial impact was greater in some countries than others. In Iran, Egypt, and Morocco, cultural differentiation did not threaten national unity as it did in many places. The Saud family captured much of the Arabian peninsula and imposed monarchical rule on areas not yet mobilized to resist. Family ownerships in the smaller states on the western side of the Gulf tried to avoid nationalism and the idea of equal citizenship as did Yemen in the southwest corner of the peninsula until 1962.

Cultural discourse affected the rest of the region more significantly. It came to play a positive role in the establishment of republican Turkey and the founding of Israel. Those states built national identities on cultural affinities---language bolstered by religion in both cases. These states developed from nationalist movements at roughly the same moment, the late nineteenth century. The construction of Turkism and Zionism took place before World War I, and by the 1920s, when Atatürk was building a new state in Anatolia, Jewish settlers in Palestine had already founded institutions that would come to anchor the state of Israel two decades later. Turks and Zionists both worked explicitly from European models of what a nation was supposed to be. They invoked historic experience, language, and religion to support their national ambitions and built republics based on equal citizenship and democratic procedures. The cultural model produced political stability and a strong penchant for democracy, though it created problems that neither state has been willing or able to overcome: Kurdish alienation in Turkey, and Palestinian alienation in Israel. The tenacious attachment to cultural identities in these two states compromises their liberal democratic qualities.

Attention to cultural issues marked Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, three states with boundaries established by virtue of an agreement struck after World War I. When the French took the mandate for Syria, they split off Lebanon as a separate state with the explicit idea of establishing a Christian-dominated entity. Recognition of cultural differences there led to the National Pact of 1944, which wrote sectarianism into the constitutional framework of the country. In modified form, the framework exists to this day; while not water tight, sectarian compartments constrain social mobility.<sup>2</sup> Lebanon still struggles with the need for a national identity that rises above religious sectarianism.

Syria and Iraq have both struggled with the politicization of religious and language differences, too. The British put a Sunni Arab family on the throne in Iraq to govern a country that was at least half Shiite and about a fourth Kurdish speaking. The French created a Syria in which a disadvantaged post-Islamic sect, the Alawis, advanced within the military establishment and occupied key political positions for fifty years. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 chased Sunni Arabs from the bureaucracy and the army and put power in the hands of Shiite Arabs; Kurds reasserted control of the northeast region, and there ensued a battle against an insurgency that reflected a solidification of Kurdish identity. It is unreasonable to argue that highly diverse populations caused the instability these two countries have faced, but it does seem that political instability has heightened the importance of cultural categories rather than diminished them in the name of equal citizenship. Nationalism based only on individual commitments rather than ethnicity or religion seemed flimsy and inadequate in both Syria and Iraq.<sup>3</sup> That inadequacy provoked a search for broader bases of association, such as Arab nationalism, but the efforts of the Arab Renaissance Party (the Baath) to articulate an ideology that would unite the two countries failed to erase national differences. Narrow nationalism, however flawed, triumphed over the Baathist version of Arabism but achieved only temporary and partial reductions in the importance of cultural identities that threatened it in both Iraq and Syria.

Nationalist thought came out of Europe but undermined the notion of culture at the civilizational level that underlay Orientalism. The national divisions of Europe, which were a necessary part of the European encroachment on the Middle East, conflicted with the idea that Western civilization was of a piece. Moreover, the nationalist idea not only contributed to the destruction of the Ottoman Empire but produced the solidification of cultural identities inconsistent with the nationalist idea itself. As the West penetrated the East, the hypothetical boundaries between them broke down, and lack of coherence on both sides became readily apparent. Culture

as a characteristic of civilization gave way to culture as categories, and categories did not, in the main, fit into the boundaries of states. The dispersal of categories does not necessarily account for conflict and instability, but rare was the country---Lebanon is the only example from the region--- that reconciled itself to cultural multiplicity. Elsewhere governments made efforts to downplay, deny, neglect or just ignore cultural diversity in an effort to protect national unity.

Revolutionary states went further. They sought to transform basic elements of culture, religion and language, into ideologies supportive of the state. Turkey, Israel, and Algeria saw language as key to the social and political transformations they undertook. Turkey changed from the Arab to the Roman script to write vernacular Turkish and distance itself from the Ottoman Empire. Zionism adopted Hebrew as its language to distance itself from the Jewish diaspora, and Algeria decided to promote modern standard Arabic to confirm its cultural divorce from France. In two cases, that of Israel and Algeria, the language decision influenced religious culture, too. Modern Standard Arabic resembles the language of the Qur'an, and Hebrew before its revival was also a language of religion. The Algerian decision appears to have encouraged the rise of Islamism in that country, and the prevalence of Hebrew may help explain the increase in religiosity in Israel in recent decades, despite the secular orientation of the early Zionists. These states politicized language choices in order to achieve political goals.

Almost every state in the region politicized religion in some measure. Politicization in Israel took two forms: government action in conferring special status on the Orthodox rabbinate and in reaching an understanding about rules of Kashrut and the Sabbath with the ultra-orthodox; and political parties with explicit religious commitments that were essential to governing coalitions from the first moment of independence. In Turkey the state assumed direction of all religious institutions despite provisions of the constitution guaranteeing secularism. The state regarded unauthorized

religious activities, such as those of Said Nursi and his followers in the early decades of the Turkish republic, as political opposition. With the coming to power of President Erdoğan and his Justice and Development party, religious symbols such as the headscarf have been transformed into signs of support for the regime. This partisanship attached to an item of dress has afflicted education at all levels including the universities.

Revolutionary Iran sent even further than the other states of the region in politicizing culture. Perhaps the emphasis on culture produced by the revolution of 1979 in Iran should not have been a surprise. For some observers, Western culture in the form of dress, music, movies and entertainment had taken the country by storm in the 1960s and 1970s as Iran enjoyed oil-driven prosperity. Moreover, Shah Mohammed Pahlavi had politicized religion by attacking the clerical class and one ayatollah highly critical of the regime, Ruhollah Khomeini, in particular. Despite some appointments to high religious office, the shah never enjoyed control of the clerical hierarchy. By injudicious attacks on the seminaries in Qom he opened the way for religion to become a tool of opposition. The regime that installed itself after the revolution called itself the “Islamic Republic” and gave the clerical class a prominent place in government. While several of the most distinguished religious scholars did not accept the merger of religion and state, the regime has managed to marginalize such voices. The extraordinary effort to politicize religion makes it clear why young women who challenge the rules by wearing bright colors and showing some hair in public can see themselves as engaged in political resistance.

Most of the Arab states in the region have sought to prevent religious leaders and organizations from using religious claims against the regime. By nationalizing mosques and making preachers and prayer leaders employees of the state, they have effectively politicized religious activity. Egypt has engaged in the most conspicuous struggle against unauthorized religion,

represented primarily by the Muslim Brotherhood as well as other groups, some of which have been violent. The methods of the state have usually been heavy-handed, as illustrated by the jailing of Muslim Brotherhood leadership after the military coup against President Morsi in 2013. Meanwhile, the Egyptian state has sought to clothe itself in Islamic respectability to curry public favor. As elsewhere, the Egyptian state portrays itself as supportive of the sharia, despite complaints to the contrary by Islamist groups. Islamist groups in the Arab world have succeeded in making the sharia—perhaps best described as a discourse on law within the Islamic tradition---an element of political debate almost everywhere.

Contemporary leaders have chosen to politicize language as well as religion in response to perceived needs of their state, or, which should be the same thing, their own political survival. The theory of nationalism inherited from Europe has played a role, perhaps most clearly in the cases of Israel and the Turkish Republic, where language choices were especially important. Getting beyond colonialism helps explain the actions of Algeria with respect to Arabic but that does not, of course, explain why Tunisia next door did not put as much emphasis on Arabization. Language policies in all these cases represented choices of nationalist elites.

Not much more than a century ago classical Arabic was a language mainly taught in Quranic schools and in relatively autonomous madrasas run by religious personnel, themselves products of the religious system of education. It became a political issue in the middle of the nineteenth century when the use of the printing press and the appearance of newspapers in Arabic led to revision of the language into what has become known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Governments began to create modern public schools functioning not only in Arabic but also, in some cases, in French or English. They might have chosen to promote the vernacular languages, which were much less forbidding and much more accessible to the masses. Europe had chosen the vernaculars over Latin.

Turkey had gone with the vernacular in abandoning the Ottoman version of Turkish, which contained many elements of Arabic and Persian. Zionism rejected the most popular vernacular, Yiddish, and the Arab states, all of them, stayed with MSA as the official language in response to pressures from religious authorities who saw it as a defense of religion, Islamist organizers who sometimes founded schools to promote its teaching, pan-Arab nationalists arguing that language defines a people, and anti-imperial sentiment, as in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, where French had recently dominated written communication. The multiple national decisions to teach and promote Modern Standard Arabic represented compromise from a communications perspective: Arabic lacked the international following of English, Spanish and French but combatted the particularism of the vernaculars.

The adoption of MSA as a standard of instruction across the region augmented the power in the 1950s and 1960s of President Gamal Abd al-Nasir of Egypt, who advanced himself as a spokesman for the Arab “nation,” however defined. It also advantaged Egypt as a supplier of teachers to Arab states where literacy in MSA was highly limited, as in Saudi Arabia and Algeria. At a later epoch, the advantage accrued to the Gulf States, where a combination of wealth and relative freedom of the press in Qatar and Bahrain permitted the growth of a communications industry based primarily in Arabic.<sup>4</sup> Transmissions from the Gulf have won audience in the North African states once focused on French programming. Egyptian preachers using Gulf technology reinforced Islamizing movements in distant climes, with resulting chagrin in the more secular, French- and Tamazigh-speaking publics of North Africa. The battles over language are likely to continue at every level of education in the Mahgreb.

To study Arabic, Turkish, or Hebrew or to study the belief systems of Islam or Judaism does not necessarily provide much help in the analysis of politics in the MENA. But those studies help in

identifying the ways in language and religion have been invoked and modified for political purposes by individuals, groups, and governments. Culture affects politics by virtue of human agents who bring cultural traditions to bear at particular moments for particular purposes. In this way they contribute to the ever increasing complexity of those traditions and diminish the explanatory utility of the broadest cultural categories, such as Muslim or Christian, Sunni or Shiite, Islamist or secularist, Arab, Kurd, Turk, Persian or Berber. National policies define the significance of those categories and others.

The treatment of women in the Middle East and North Africa illustrates both the advantages and disadvantages of cultural explanations. Sweeping generalizations about the impact of culture on women in the area fail to account for the great variety of circumstances and opportunities that women of the region confront. The question is not so much whether cultural practices influence behavior but which ideas and practices help explain the great range of choices affecting women. Governments have adopted highly varied policies affecting women's rights within the family, rights to participate in politics, chances to study at the highest level, opportunities to be employed outside the home, and more. In that sense women function in as many cultural settings as there are nation-states in the area. But cultural practices vary within every state from rural to urban areas and from one class to another. Furthermore, the presence of strong Islamist organizations and/or vigorous human rights organizations, local or international, further enrich the cultural choices available to women in some countries. Such choice is less available where authoritarian regimes seek to enforce a single cultural idea, as in Saudi Arabia, or where political chaos exposes women to existential threats they do not face elsewhere.

The story of what women are doing in the MENA is one of dynamic change and infinite variety. The economic transformation that has marked all societies, some more significantly than

others, is fundamental to explaining changing roles for women, as the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi pointed out long ago.<sup>5</sup> But the prominence of this issue goes back to European observations about women as a principal indicator of difference in the Orient, and the subsequent emphasis put on the cultural issue by reformers in Egypt and Turkey starting about 1900. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's designation of women as the great symbol of change and modernity played a role. Pushing women into the public sphere and according them political rights became a cultural issue, which spurred cultural resistance, first from established religious authorities and then in the twentieth century from Islamist organizations. Human rights advocates at the international level have continued to see the treatment of women as a cultural issue with linkage to abuses in judicial systems, censorship of media, political imprisonment, or authoritarianism in general.

Almost any matter touching the role of women in politics elicits use of cultural generalizations. Secular feminists in Morocco face charges that they are trying to promote "Western culture," which some believe demeans women with public nudity. Arguments continue about the attitudes of "true" Islam toward women. International human rights organizations see Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as a cultural issue linked to Islam. Careful research on issues such as the headscarf tends to focus instead the meaning of cultural traditions in micro settings. What is the meaning of the hijab in a bourgeois section of Cairo? How does patriarchy play out in a village of upper Egypt? How women deal with complicated choices may turn on convenience or economic calculations as much as culture. Such micro studies tend to undercut the broad ideological generalizations that mark debate but do little to explain the variety of outcomes in countries of the MENA. Broad generalizations about women tend to neglect history and exaggerate uniformity of cultural practices.

### **Culture as Civilization**

The idea of culture as civilization still resonates in the anti-Western rhetoric of radical Islamists and the Republic of Iran, in some quarters of the liberal, democratic world, and in the debates of intellectuals across the Middle East and North Africa. In the academic world, the sweeping assertions of Orientalism about Islam or the Islamic world have largely disappeared, but the modernization paradigm, the idea that there is a single path of progress, still has its fervent champions.<sup>6</sup> It is the emphasis on secularism as essential to democratic development that has been most sharply challenged by scholars in several disciplines.<sup>7</sup> For the last fifty years and more, intellectuals in the region have struggled to separate their opposition to European colonialism from their support for ideas of the Enlightenment. They have sought to distinguish between the need to draw on traditional beliefs and practices as foundations for national identities without letting cultural particularity separate them from universal principles such as individual liberty and equality. And they have argued about whether adopting Western ways in technology and science can be separated from the secularism many Muslims believe is inconsistent with their faith. Does the prevalence of authoritarianism in the region reflect a cultural problem or are the obstacles to modernization and democratic governance simply political problems, abuses of power often cloaked in cultural terms?

Ideas of cultural superiority drove Western imperialism in the MENA from the invasion of Egypt onward. The Europeans trumpeted their superior knowledge of science, military organization and technology, support for tolerance and human equality, and disdain for “Oriental despotism.” The peoples of the MENA subjected to imperialism came to see the hypocrisy in European behavior, but they also witnessed the power of nationalism, an idea that, while a product of enlightenment thought in Europe, was also the key to resisting foreign domination. What is now often referred to as the first Arab *nahda*, or renaissance, which began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, embraced the whole of the Enlightenment package. The *nahda* was arguably devoted to national liberation but also to liberty of conscience, gender equality, freedom of speech, freedom of the

press, modern education and secular, republican government. As Liah Greenfeld and others have argued, nationalism implies the equality of all citizens; monarchy presumes inequality between rulers and ruled.<sup>8</sup> After World War I, Turkey sought to realize Enlightenment ideals, but the Arab countries lost sight of those ideals effort and so did Iran.

Was the first *nabda* a failure? Arab intellectuals continue to argue about that point. Those who say “no” believe that those who championed Arab nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s advanced ideals and ideas that continue to reverberate. If the *nabda* failed, it was not just the fault of Westerners but because, in the views of some, Gamal abd al-Naisr, who took power in Egypt after 1952---greatly hailed a resounding victory for Arab nationalism---broke with the principles of the *nabda* by failing to guarantee civil liberties, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience and political democracy. Other independent Arab countries—Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia---also betrayed the ideals of the *nabda* individually and collectively by failing to unite in a single liberal Arab democracy.

Israel’s defeat of three Arab states in 1967 ---Egypt, Syria, and Jordan---produced a profound malaise across the Arab world and provoked soul searching among Arab intellectuals seeking to explain the disaster. For some the malaise resulted from the Arab world abandoning its roots and its faith in its search for modernity. The longstanding claim of the Muslim Brotherhood was that Islam was the answer. The Brotherhood and other Islamist movements across the region pushed the focus of intellectual debate to the question of authenticity. Arab leaders including Anwar al-Sadat in Egypt, Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia, and Chadli Benjedid in Algeria cultivated the support of Islamist groups in an effort to solidify their positions and soothe the malaise.

The search for authenticity meant looking beyond the obvious for a truth about the past. The whole of the MENA was predominantly Muslim, and most states embraced Islam as the

national religion. But Islamists insisted that authentic Islam, the Islam of the Prophet and his companions, required not just belief and prayer but political activism to achieve reform of the society and government. Authenticity meant resistance to secularizing governments; cultivation of particularism in lifestyle in opposition to the Westernizing universalism of entertainment, fashion, and rights; insistence on the oneness of Islam in contrast to the plural reality of groups and practices; and the agency of Muslims, following the example of the Prophet, to transform their states and the world as a whole with their actions. The appeal to agency contrasted with what Islamists saw as the determinism of the Westernizing models of modernization promising democracy and economic growth, pursued by authoritarian governments and supported by foreign subsidies but incapable of challenging Israel or producing prosperity much less freedom. International agencies such as the International Monetary Funds told governments what they needed to do to achieve economic growth, and governments imprisoned and executed those who objected to their plans. Islamist ideologues called people to action.

There were multiple versions of what constituted the “true” Islam. In Iran Ali Shariati won many followers with a version of “red” Shiism that owed something to Marxism and something to a fresh reading of early Islamic history. The Ayatollah Khomeini, who emerged from the Iranian revolution as the leader of his country, fashioned quite a different version of Shii doctrine, which put him at odds with many of the champions of Shariati as well as a majority of fellow clerics. The authentic Islam as laid out by the Egyptian martyr, Sayyid Qutb, differed markedly from the version of Islam pursued in Turkey or Tunisia. And the intellectual responses to these multiple, insistent, and powerful pleas for authenticity were multiple as well.

The most powerful answer to the demand for authenticity came from those who criticized the Islamist abuse of history. Three voices stood out in that response: Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri,

Mohammed Arkoun, and Nasr Abu Zayd. Separately and in somewhat different ways they all criticized Islamist thinkers, most of them laymen without formal training in the Islamic sciences, for lifting particular pieces of Islamic doctrine, practice, or experience from the historical context in which they emerged. They charged the Islamists with converting particular aspects of Islam---such as the concept of sharia, or the actions of early Muslims, or the theories of medieval scholars---into ideologies incompatible with modern scholarship, tolerance, human rights, and democracy. While most Islamists embraced modern technology, and some denounced authoritarianism and proclaimed their support of democracy, their critics deplored the eagerness of despotic regimes to embrace “authenticity” as an excuse for postponing reform and repressing dissent..

These three distinguished Arab intellectuals put themselves at the very edge of the great debate about culture. They wrote from within Islam but from a philosophical perspective to challenge Islamists for an inadequate understanding of Islamic history. Al-Jabiri, a prolific Moroccan philosopher, emphasized the rationalist side of Islamic philosophy represented in part by Ibn Rushd (Averoes), who played an important part in helping Europeans rediscover the work of Aristotle in the Renaissance. He deplored the “defeat of reason at the hand of irrational mysticism” as “one of the most important and lasting legacies of this formative period.”<sup>9</sup> Abu Zayd, an Egyptian, sought to explore the origins of the Quran in the context of seventh century Arabia using modern methodologies. A colleague at Cairo University accused him of apostasy, a court divorced him from his wife, and he ended his career in the Netherlands.<sup>10</sup>

Mohammed Arkoun, an Algerian Berber of origin who wrote in French and taught at the Sorbonne, proposed that the truth about Islam would come, not from adopting this or that doctrine, this or that moment of history, this or that version of the Sharia as the source of authenticity, but from understanding all that Muslims had thought and done in the name of religion as well as what

they had left unthought and unsaid, often as the result of repression. He believed what he termed the human sciences could establish a reliable set of truths about all religions including Islam. Working within a liberal, democratic framework in France, he deplored ideological secularism, but also the efforts of governments in the region, including the Algerian, to exploit a narrow, ideological version of Islam to enhance their authority. He worked on the margins of East and West and garnered little support and recognition from either, in his own view. Strangely, and tragically for Arab philosophy, Al-Jabiri (75), Abu Zayd (67), and Arkoun (82) all died within a few months of each other in 2010.

In the decade before the uprisings that came to be known as the Arab Spring, 2011, there emerged a debate about “enlightenment” among Arab intellectuals, *tanwir* in Arabic, that seemed to suggest fresh support for secular reason. One author proposed a resurrection of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, whom he would send as an emissary of enlightenment to the region.<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, a philosopher of Lebanese origin, compared the views of some Egyptian intellectuals with each other for their understandings of “enlightenment,” and she looked at some Syrian writers in the same way. One notable difference in circumstances: the Egyptian government under President Mubarek consistently expressed its support for the rule of law, democratic elections, human rights, freedom of speech and more. Intellectuals differed about whether it was better to call out the regime for its hypocrisy or support the regime in hopes of nudging it toward reforms in the direction of liberty and democracy. In Syria, the Assad regime did not bother with hypocritical endorsement of enlightenment principles; it was unambiguously oppressive. For Syrian intellectuals enlightenment mean freedom from arbitrary rule, freedom to criticize, freedom to participate in politics.<sup>12</sup>

Professor Kassab argues that the debate among Arab intellectuals in this period leading up to the Arab Spring shifted from one about culture to one about the exercise of political power. That is, the earlier debate about authenticity provoked reflection about what constituted the essence of Arab culture and especially Muslim culture. Was there a way to be modern and true to an authentic understanding of local culture? How much of European culture could be accepted and how much rejected? When enlightenment became the focus, modern reason and science emerged at the center of discussion. Now the focus was not a rethinking of Islam but a re-imagining of enlightenment ideas in a dark, repressive, authoritarian world. How to combat authoritarian regimes was the focus. The culturalism that seemed to dominate the earlier debates---the idea that a transformation of culture would open the way to political reform---had given way to more explicitly political diagnoses of the Arab malaise. Liberty and democracy had reasserted themselves as universal objectives.

These debates among Arab intellectuals, or parallel debates over the importance of culture in Iran, Turkey or Israel, necessarily depend on language. Is the Arabic word for authenticity, *asala*, entirely equivalent to authenticity? In English and other European languages has a history that reflects European romanticism of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and re-emerges in postmodern philosophy. The Arabic term *asala*, which apparently acquired political significance in the 1950s, does not have that baggage. When Arab intellectuals reflect on what *tamwir* (enlightenment) might mean in their society, the term has already escaped from its European equivalent, however much those intellectuals may be familiar with its European reference. Michelle Browers has provided a careful study of the term “civil society” as translated and utilized by Arab intellectuals. It does not mean the same thing to all of them, any more than it has an unambiguous meaning in European languages.<sup>13</sup> Western authors differ in defining the term, and there is no single perfect translation of that term into Arabic. Should the use of that concept, with whatever connotations it may invoke in an Arab context, be regarded as European? Translation necessarily affects meanings and may cause certain

concepts to fit easily into a foreign culture while other translations of the same concept may jar sensibilities. As such terms find their way into other languages and other contexts, they lose their cultural specificity.

Political Scientist Stephanie Lawson writes:

Seen in this light, culturalist responses to universalist theories and methodologies, including normative and methodological concerns to treat ‘other cultures’ on their own terms, are no less Eurocentric. They are saturated with those ‘Western’ norms and values devised within and through both historicist and anthropological approaches to the issue of difference. . . . But if the culture concept as formulated in Western thought does have resonance in ‘other’ places, this simply demonstrates, once again, the fallacy of origins, the incoherence of relativism and the problems of methodological contextualism.<sup>14</sup>

What she calls the “fallacy of origins” links the validity of a concept with its origin in place and time. The tendency in the MENA to dismiss human rights discourse as a Western phenomenon exemplifies the fallacy, which suffers contradiction if the concept of culture, also European in origin, is accepted without taint while other aspects of Western thought are rejected. Those who create ideas cannot maintain ownership. The incoherence of relativism stems in part from its insistence upon sharp cultural boundaries. And the problems of methodological contextualism include lack of clear theory to identify a proper context for judgment. Should the cultural practice of genital mutilation be seen in the context of female health, of Islamic belief and scripture, of a country such as Egypt where it is prevalent, or of universal human rights? The concept of culture, like that of class, cannot be completely detached from its origins and its inherent limitations, but that observation scarcely validates or invalidates the uses made of it in the MENA and elsewhere.

## Culture as Categories and Ideology

Designating categories of people by their cultural affinities continues to be a mainstay of reporting on the MENA, probably because actors both within and outside the region depend upon categories, such as Sunni and Shiite, for better or worse.<sup>15</sup> Proclaiming itself a Shiite state, Iran appears eager to assist Shiites in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, although it is not certain that religious solidarity is the driving force behind these foreign initiatives. 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 Shiite Muslims more particularly. The meaning of that label has changed, as does the meaning of every such label. By its use of sectarian labels to allocate seats in Parliament, the Lebanese political system assures the importance of difference, 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-Qaeda 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. It is only a subset of those who speak the dialects of Arabic who came to 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, because he invoked claims to be following religious tradition. 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 Gamal abd al-Nasir and his pretensions to represent all Arabs. 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.

It is difficult to dismiss the notion of cultural categories in discussing the MENA, because actors inside and outside the region have come to rely on these categories 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 cannot serve to explain why cultural affinities, based in language, religion, or ethnicity emerge from the obscurity of indifference to powerful political motivators and why cultural differences explode into political actions.

Almost all states in the region use culture as ideology in one fashion or another. Saudi Arabia harnessed a puritanical, exclusivist doctrine of Wahhabism to its purposes and continues to uphold some of its principles, so long as they do not interfere with the monarchy's vision of modernity or the needs of foreign policy. Many Arab countries besides Egypt under Nasir or Syria

under Baath party domination have embraced a version of Arabism. Muammar al-Qadhafi, who overthrew the monarchy in Libya in 1969, took Nasir as his model, but then embellished a commitment to Arabism with a mishmash of ideas that included Islamism and a personal style intended to evoke tribal culture. The revolutionary regime in Iran defended the constitution adopted in 1979 as reflective of Islamic principles but was careful not to endorse a revolutionary vision of Islam proposed by an early dissident, Ali Shariati. Instead, the constitution enacted a theory put forward by founder Aytaollah Ruhollah Khomeini that the most distinguished jurist of the age should rule the country, a theory favoring stability and deflecting further revolution. These are but a few examples of ways in which regimes have turned cultural concepts into ideology.

### **Class and Culture**

Class and culture both serve as lenses for analysis and rationales for action.. The Marxist notion of history as a product of class struggle challenged prevailing liberal views of progress in Europe, and Max Weber saw culture as part of an answer to Marx. One is as thoroughly European in origin as the other, but this does not affect their utility in the politics of the MENA. In the 1960s Manfred Halpern proposed that class would be the key variable in explaining change in the Middle East. Identifying the rise of democracy in the West with the emergence of a propertied middle class, he acknowledged that such a class was yet embryonic; a new, bureaucratic middle class, military and civilian, was nonetheless emerging, he said, and that class was likely to carry the region toward more liberal, democratic institutions.<sup>16</sup> One of Halpern's students, James A. Bill, predicted that the dictatorship in Iran would fall victim to the desire for political participation of this new middle class. He turned out to be right in his prediction of revolution for Iran but wrong about the source of leadership of the revolution, which came from an improbable quarter, the clerics, who certainly played to class---the *mostazifin* or dispossessed--- as well as to religion in their appeal.<sup>17</sup>

In 1950s and 1960s governments in Algeria, Egypt, Syria and Iraq turned to Arab socialism as an ideology of development. Socialism meant state control of important industries and a commitment to universal education and subsidies on basic goods. President Nasir launched land reform in Egypt but did it before he actually endorsed socialism. He specifically rejected the idea that Arab socialism entailed class conflict. All four countries received assistance from the Soviet Union, but the Communist party was illegal in Egypt, and despite its numerical strength in Iraq, suffered repression from the Baathist regime there, as well. From a Soviet perspective, Arab socialism was more about Arabism than socialism.

The socialist regimes had lost their forward motion by the 1980s. As the Islamist movement gained prominence after the Six-Day War of 1967 and after Sadat's liberation of Muslim Brotherhood leaders in 1970, culture began to supplant class as a primary driver of politics in the MENA. The Arab Socialism of Gamal Abd al-Nasir (d. 1970) had given way to Anwar al-Sadat's Open Door policy, which sought to reinvigorate capitalism. President Boumediene's socialism in Algeria lost ground to liberalization under President Bendjedid. By the 1980s Saddam Hussein had led Iraq into war with Iran, undercutting the socialist reforms and material progress achieved under Baathist rule in the 1970s. The Baathists had successfully suppressed the Communist Party in Iraq but were flummoxed by the claims and complaints of Kurds and Shia, groups who were alternatively cultivated and repressed. The Shah's Iran used the Kurds to pressure the Iraqi regime, and post-revolutionary Iran directed its religious propaganda toward Iraqi Shia. With the verbal assaults of the Ayatollah Khomeini added to longstanding Iraqi grievances with Iran, the notoriously secular Saddam Hussein proclaimed *jihad*.

Though potentially contradictory justifications of political action, class and culture share strengths as well as weaknesses. One strength is the grandeur of promises. Both terms invite

sweeping generalizations about the course of history. It is plausible that the working class of Europe felt common identity by virtue of its lack of control over wages and working conditions and its vulnerabilities to the “creative destruction” of capitalism, to use economist Joseph Schumpeter’s famous phrase. Though the working class did not everywhere prove as revolutionary as Marx imagined, class does help explain the emergence of labor unions and social democratic parties. Class was a powerful factor in British voting behavior and the politics of most other European democracies in the twentieth century. It was also plausible that class affects politics in the Middle East and North Africa, but so far the equivalent of unions and parties have not managed to make that influence as effective as might have been expected. (Union activities did play a significant role in events of the Arab Spring in both Tunisia and Egypt.) Class posits a common interest but does not necessarily guarantee common identification or organization.

Culture offers a non-material rationale for common interest, though it may have material implications. It is perhaps plausible that a group such as the Kurds feel commonality, even though they speak various dialects and have long been divided by tribal loyalties. It is only in the last century that Kurds have begun to organize in the name of Kurdish nationalism, asking for a state after World War I, contesting the modern Turkish state, and now forming a regional government in northern Iraq.<sup>18</sup> Baumann writes: “Ethnicity is the product of people’s actions and identifications, not the product of nature working by itself. This is why ethnicity is not about blood as such or ancestry as such.”<sup>19</sup> The promise is nationalism leading to statehood.

Samuel P. Huntington’s prediction that a clash of civilizations would characterize world politics in the wake of the Cold War presumed that Muslims feel a common identity, even though there has not been any organizational representation of all Muslims since the Umayyad Caliphate (660 to 750). Like class, culture lends itself to theories and claims but does not by itself represent or

guarantee political activity. To translate hypothetical identity into common action requires that voices and organizations make it happen. In the contemporary Middle East, Islamist organizations have done with culture what labor unions and socialist parties did for class in Europe, although Islamists have not managed to recruit all Muslims to their ranks any more than socialists were able to mobilize the entire working class within even one nation.

One reason that culture has dominated class in the Middle East is that class conflicts with nationalism while culture can serve to reinforce it. Marx regarded nationalism as a bourgeois charade to distract people from the capitalist oppression they should feel and from their roles as members of the proletariat with its historic destiny of establishing a new utopia. Nonetheless, the working class of Europe proved willing to fight and die for country in the wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and not so anxious to man the barricades protesting capitalism. In an alternative German formulation, nationalism stemmed from cultural roots. Turkey and Zionism sought to implement the German model, creating states based on a rationale of common culture, despite some evident problems in doing so. In the rest of the MENA, culture been less helpful in supporting national entities. Socialism, Arabism, Islamism, Kurdism, Sunnism, Shiism—none has found an easy fit with the established boundaries of nation-states in the region. The Islamic Republic of Iran might constitute an exception to that observation, but the fit even there is problematic because Sunnis constitute a significant minority and the boundaries of the country do not include all Shia, or even all Twelver Shia.

Governments and oppositions have politicized cultural affinities, even though defining culture is just as difficult as Scharstein's cloud simile suggests. (See Chapter One.) As demonstrated in Chapter Two, national regimes in the Middle East and North Africa have sought to use language and religion to legitimate the viability of their states. Only a few have been moderately successful.

Several of the states have been anxious to rework the cultural composition of their countries by policies affecting language and/or religion. The cultural characteristics of these countries offer little help in explaining political outcomes, whereas historical development and contemporary political outcomes provide significant explanations of cultural tensions and divisions. As shown in Chapter 3, it is not culture as categories that best explains the significant differences in the condition of women in these countries but rather their political and economic circumstances. Objective accounts of culture are no more thinkable than an objective treatment of class.

Two examples show the degree to which culture has proved more useful than class in in the contemporary MENA. Labor Zionism came to dominate formation of a state apparatus in the Jewish community prior to independence. Coalitions based on labor parties dominated the Knesset until the 1977 earthquake elections, but socialism no longer draws broad support except among Arab voters. Politics in Israel focuses on the occupied territories; explicitly cultural issues, such as the exemption from military service accorded to the ultra-orthodox or the treatment of non-Jews in the society, loom more significant than material inequalities in society, which have not diminished. One might imagine that politics in the Gulf states would pit immigrant workers, a proletarian majority, against a bourgeois minority of citizens, but lack of citizenship and harsh restrictions on protest blunt that confrontation. The presence of too many Shia among the immigrants may be more worrisome to the Gulf states than the class threat.

At the level of international relations in the MENA, culture appears more important than class in the current era. The old clash between capitalist and socialist states that marked the region in the 1960s and 1970s has disappeared. The Saudis no longer need to fear Marxism in either its Soviet form or that once embraced by South Yemen, Egypt, Algeria, Syria, and Iraq. Gregory Gause, in his treatment of the Gulf as a security region, notes that cultural concerns are central to latent and

manifest conflicts.<sup>20</sup> Migration is of great concern on the Arab side of the Gulf, where there is also lingering concern about Shiite domination of Iraq. From the earliest days of the Islamic Republic, when pilgrims from Iran disrupted the annual hajj in Saudi Arabia, there has been religious tension between those two countries.

The invocation of class often underpins a demand for the reduction of social inequalities or even revolution. Culture, to the contrary, often supports conservative desires for preservation. Bourdieu writes: “Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness.”<sup>21</sup> The defense of the order becomes a defense of the culture. Nancy Fraser said in an interview that she was interested in culture “only insofar as it is a medium of injustice. . . I take the relevant slice of culture to be institutionalized patterns of value that regulate social interaction.”<sup>22</sup> If those patterns are hierarchical, they create injustice. Lawson asserts: “Only minimal effort is needed to see how particular cultural formations, and the logic of culturalist claims which defend them, can work to oppress certain classes of people . . . and determine for them a subordinate position in a hierarchy of power and privilege justified by reference to a morality of context.”<sup>23</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein argues that the concept of culture came along to help justify capitalism.<sup>24</sup>

The claim that individuals have a “right” to preserve their own cultures appears conservative in intent. Canadians including Will Kymlicka have led that campaign on behalf of indigenous peoples, attacking the most prominent American political theorist of the twentieth century, John Rawls, who posits undifferentiated human beings unaffected by particular cultural circumstances making decisions about their political future. The great early exponents of liberalism---Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau---all constructed political theories with a presumption that human beings once lived as equals in a “state of nature,” lacking all social

organization and hierarchy. While the New World might from a European perspective have approximated the state of nature, it did not lack for people or social organization. The idea that all peoples have a right to their culture is potentially threatening not just to Canada or the United States but to every political entity on the planet, because it is formulated in the language of universality and because no political entity is utterly homogenous. Everywhere there are languages and cultural groupings that are disappearing.

Who has a right to culture comes down to an issue of political power. The success of the Amazigh in Morocco in winning support for language in some public schools must be understood in the context of a centralized monarchy characterized by a flexibility and responsiveness that has permitted survival despite relative poverty. The Moroccan state has been more accommodating of Amazigh demands than the Algerian republic next door, perhaps because Berbers there found their voice in resistance to state policies bent on imposing Arab/Islamic culture. Preserving language and culture perhaps comes more easily to a monarchy, which depends on the continuity of traditional relationships, than to a revolutionary republic.

### **Culture and Power**

In the Middle East and North Africa, those who have power believe they must cultivate and manipulate culture in order to retain and justify their positions. Those who do so are successful; those who fail find themselves challenged and overthrown. And who are the challengers? In this era they are less likely to be Marxists than 50 years ago, when revolutionaries anywhere and everywhere latched onto some version of Marxism. In this particular moment dissidents in the MENA are most likely Islamists, some of whom seek influence by playing the electoral game, others willing to use violence at the national level, and still others, ISIS and al-Qaeda, apparently believing

that salvation will arrive only when the West has been defeated and an Islamic state rules the world. They carry on the fight wherever the weakness of state governance will permit it.

Advantage in the battle over culture lies with national governments. Examining the focus of every government on curriculum in the schools is an indication of the power that lurks there. Controlling religious practices, including religious education, is a high priority everywhere, too. Every regime needs the support of a religious establishment, and the usual solution is to put religious officials on the public payroll. Almost every state in the region protects itself from opposition by controlling access to the media and providing propaganda to defend itself against religious critique. Even the Saud family has felt threatened by charges that it betrays true Islam. It continues to feel threatened by the Muslim Brotherhood, within and without the country. That was part of a long-term quarrel with Qatar, which had been supportive of the Brotherhood in Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

The uprisings of the Arab Spring appeared to begin with protests by secular, democratic forces in Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and elsewhere, but it was broadly assumed that Islamist groups would soon take the lead, as they did in Egypt and Tunisia, because these groups had cohesion, organization, and leadership that was completely lacking among secular democratic forces. Revolutionary socialism seemed to be missing in action, even though economic discontents and objection to crony capitalism clearly played a role. Labor agitation in Egypt had been significant in the years leading up to 2011, and the uprising in Tunisia began in one of the poorest parts of the country. A long period of drought in Syria seems to have generated discontent, but secular, democratic opposition to the Assad regime lost the leadership of the revolt to Islamist groups of several kinds. And in Libya, once President Qadhafi had been ousted, the ensuing struggle for power involved some local militias making Islamist claims, others evoking loyalties to clan or tribe.

Qadhafi's nationalization of property insulated the country against socialism; his utterly hypocritical embrace of mass democracy, which he subverted with highly personalized rule, generated cynicism about that term. What was left to motivate opposition? Cultural affinities---inherited, revived, or imagined as they may be.

All the governments of the Middle East including Israel have utilized culture to justify their actions and legitimize their institutions. They enjoy enormous advantages over opposition forces in this respect, and yet most have responded to threat with severe repression. Egypt did so in the 1990s when the Islamic Group preyed upon police stations and tourists, and then, even more severely, when General al-Sisi staged a coup against the Morsi government and put Muslim Brotherhood leaders in prison. In 1991, the Algerian government launched a repression of Islamist groups that ended up costing perhaps 100,000 lives. Saudi Arabia had to call in French forces to expel rebel forces from the great mosque in Mecca. It also felt threatened by a religious movement in the 1990s, the Salwa, which condemned the regime for accepting U. S. troops on its soil. Revolutionary Iran unleashed a ferocious repression of the Mujahiddin e-Khalq in the early 1980s. In recent years, Israel has needed to mobilize its war machines to deal with Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. These are but a few examples to suggest that even the power that all these regimes use to manage culture has not been sufficient to curb opposition fueled by ideologies based in culture. Only force has permitted governments to survive.

That does not mean, however, that government efforts to manipulate culture to their advantage are necessarily ineffective. Lisa Wedeen has described in some detail the cult constructed around Hafiz al-Asad in Syria. She argues persuasively that the cult portraying the president as a messiah, his mother as a Muslim Madonna, and his miracles equal to those of the New Testament, contributed to acceptance of the regime. People behaved "as if" they believed. To impose such a

cult requires great power backed by implicit violence, and the resulting cultural construct then magnifies the capacity of the regime to produce obedience. Wedeen suggests that the gentle mocking of the cult in cartoons and some plays probably served to reinforce rather than to destroy it.<sup>25</sup> Hence, regime toleration. It costs less to promote a cult than to repress by force, and yet, as Salwa Ismail emphasizes, the Asads, father and son, have used violence and the threat of violence to sustain their rule.<sup>26</sup> The bombing of Hama and killing of thousands in order to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood is the prime example, proof that violence is a costly means of securing obedience. Force underlies the manipulation of culture.

Other regimes would not invest so heavily in seeking to dominate cultural values and attitudes if leaders did not believe in the importance of doing so. They recognize that people make choices to influence politics even in undemocratic systems. Those choices are broader than they once were. The European assault on the MENA eventually produced a choice, expressed early on in the Ottoman Empire as life *ala turca* or *ala franca*. Western values, liberalism, democracy continue to affect choices all over the region, and Marxism has not ceased to influence choice despite the demise of the Soviet Union. But modernity has produced a fresh set of choices: even in authoritarian regimes; Muslims can choose to think that their religious convictions are relevant to politics, or not. They can act “as if” they support a regime or they can actually believe. They can revolt against religious practices that are compulsory and find spiritual inspiration elsewhere. They can make language choices for themselves and their children. The choices multiply as migration intensifies and communication improves. By seeking to manipulate cultural practices regimes have unintentionally emphasized the availability and importance of choice but they have not, for the most part, found ways to accommodate the political consequences. Here are few examples:

- In the success of the AK Party in Turkey in 2002, many saw a promising opening of Turkish democracy to a rural, pious portion of the country long underrepresented in the era of secular Kemalist domination. But the Islamist movement that carried President Erdoğan to power subsequently split and the result was an attempted coup and subsequent repression that set Turkish democracy back a few decades. The system could not accommodate competing versions of Islamism, much less a state in which Kurdish (or Armenian, or Alevi) identifiers enjoy equal status.
- Still reeling from the horrors of the 1990s, Algeria eased up on its efforts to expunge Islamism and impose Arabic as the national language. The regime permitted the re-emergence of a wide variety of civil associations and private media that reflect a diverse population, but the cultural openings did not extend to politics. Extensive demonstrations forced President Bouteflika from power in 2019 but power still seems fully concentrated in a military elite.
- In Saudi Arabia, a young prince, Muhammad bin Salman, loosened some cultural restrictions on women but at the same time demonstrated the arbitrary power of the monarchy by imprisoning powerful rivals without recourse to law and authorizing the killing of a dissident journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, in Istanbul. Resistance from Shiites in the eastern region makes it difficult for the Saud family to deny cultural diversity and easy to identify Shiism with treacherous support for Iran across the Gulf.
- Following the resignation of President Mubarek during the Arab Spring, an election drew a bewildering variety of political parties into the arena, testimony to the cultural diversity of Egypt. Many parties ran on platforms vaunting religious convictions or, quite the opposite, secular orientations. The best organized among the forces unleashed in the new democratic arena was the Muslim Brotherhood. After a year of rule under the Brotherhood, General

Sisi led a coup d'état, a restored military dictatorship, and ended the political opening initiated during the Arab Spring.

That is not to argue that cultural plurality necessarily implies liberal democratic politics, but the increasing assertion and recognition of groups claiming a foundation in culture does suggest the need for multiculturalism. As has been observed more than once, Lebanon moved to a system that recognized and then froze a set of sectarian arrangements. Elsewhere repression has not been the only response but it has been more common than accommodation and reform. Jordan has been notable for its capacity to absorb Palestinians and other refugees. Morocco and Algeria have taken steps to accommodate Berber demands. Iraq is trying to recover from the cultural disintegration that followed the U. S. invasion. Will disorder in Syria, Yemen, and Libya end in a renewal of repression or in political arrangements that seek to reduce cultural tensions by confronting them?

It is not to argue either that the increased prominence of culture in political discourse is a necessary product of the modernization syndrome or a precursor of liberal democratic developments. The region could be experiencing a phase of politics that may give way to some future development, yet unannounced and unpredictable. Cultural affinities may diminish in importance as quickly or as slowly as they have become prominent in recent years, or some types of association may recede in significance relative to others. Class may again be the most significant key to understanding politics. The future direction of history is unknowable.

The cultural configuration of any country is a moving target. In a thoughtful critique of the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, William Sewell writes:

I am no less inclined than Geertz to believe that people normally attempt to impose coherence on their world. But . . .this attempt to impose coherence can be a force for transformation of cultural systems no less than a force for stability. The double

character of symbols, far from constituting a guarantee of stability, guarantees that whatever stability is achieved can only be impermanent.<sup>27</sup>

Practices and categories that were rich in meaning yesterday lose their significance today. Cultural practices and affinities emerging today may turn out to be even more meaningful tomorrow. Categories rise and fall in importance. New groups emerge to squeeze political significance out of ancient principles. Regimes make cultural appeals that spur resistance and invite fresh ideas. Boundaries are imprecise. Impact on identity and individual decision is unknowable.

One addresses culture to understand the politics of the Middle East and North Africa, because a discourse dominated by cultural issues constitutes one aspect of the region's distinctiveness in the contemporary era. Participants believe cultural issues are important, rationalize decisions in light of them, and interpret behavior in cultural terms. Proof that culture is causal and decisive can never be definitive, but neither can it be shown that human beings only act on the basis of material concerns and interests. Scholarly interpretation requires sensitivity to both the cultural and material forces at work and some understanding of the way they interact. Sewell writes: "If Geertz, is right, as I firmly believe he is, semiotic systems are not unworldly or ghostly or imaginary; they are as integral to the life of our species as respiration, digestion, or reproduction. Materialists, this suggests, should stop worrying and love the symbol."<sup>28</sup> Interpretation does not require that scholars believe people (or governments) do what they do for the reasons they give, but neither can interpretation ignore what they say. Analysis cannot assume that culture is determinative or dismiss the possibility that it only matters in particular ways at defined moments in time. Interpretation of political life in the MENA requires understanding how cultural affinities and practices emerge significant and powerful and/or how they diminish in political significance. That is part of what

makes the study of the area fascinating and challenging. Danger lies in attributing to cultural differences essential qualities and long-range stability that they do not merit.

Cherkaoui, a political scientist who works on conflict resolution, agrees with that judgment: “Although it would surely be a mistake in any conflict in the modern world to ignore the power of cultural categories to set abusive patterns for institutions and corresponding limits on people’s lives, to see Western intolerance as the source of all ills seems to fall into the very pattern that originally inclined Marx to invent the concept of false consciousness.”<sup>29</sup> And a few pages later he writes:

In the Arab world, the most dire form of false consciousness appears to be the tendency to ascribe to cultural power (sectarianism, religion, ethnicity, etc.) abuses that probably would be better described as emerging from the power of the state itself. There is plenty of room in the region to worry about cultural discrimination and respect for the symbols of the other, but the abuses of intolerance are perhaps overmatched by those of the overweening state and its fundamental disrespect for classical human rights.<sup>30</sup>

It is the power of the state that accounts for the significance of culture, and not vice versa.

The place of tribalism in the politics of the MENA illustrates that point. In some states of the area, such as those in the Arabian peninsula, tribes have become vital political intermediaries between national governments and individuals, implementing the policies of authoritarian governments or pushing for reform as the case may be. In other states, such as Egypt or Tunisia, tribes have long been seen as relics of the past and relegated to relative insignificance. In one country, Iraq, a revolutionary regime established in 1958 sought to destroy the influence of tribes and then, under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, brought back family, clan and tribe as the foundations of political power. In Syria, where Hafiz al-

Asad took power in 1970, an ostensibly socialist regime sought to solidify its legitimacy by reaching out to tribal personalities previously exiled or sidelined. When central authority broke down in Syria after 2011, tribal affiliation once again became a source of security and a protection against anarchy.

What defines a tribe and its significance differs from state to state, and even region to region within a state. In some areas, genealogy plays a significant role; in others tribes look more like voluntary associations. By one account, tribal membership in Kurdistan comes only through the father; others may join but no one is a full member until born into it.<sup>31</sup> In other instances, women are seen as full members of a tribe. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Ottoman Empire turned “tribe” into an administrative unit in their efforts to control and tax mobile groups of people, as in the deserts of Syria.<sup>32</sup> But the settling and disbursal of Bedouin tribes across the region has not necessarily diminished the significance of tribes. In some cases, migrants to the cities continue to identify with their tribal origins. Thus tribalism of some sort continues to enjoy political salience in many places but not everywhere. And the critical variable is the state. Nadav Samin writes: “The tribe is an integral element of modern Middle Eastern societies. And yet it is hardly ubiquitous as a major force through the region. Systems of government help determine how and whether tribes matter.”<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps no government in the region is more dependent on tribal organization than the Kingdom of Jordan. “It is cliché to say that the tribes are the backbone of the Hashemite regime. It is better to say ‘asha’ir (tribes) are entangled in multiple state institutions, variously supporting and resisting them.”<sup>34</sup> Tribal groups support the king but they also demand reform. And sometimes disaffected tribal groups become militias and end

up in prison for opposing the regime. “For every tribal group on the good side of the king, there is another (often a faction within the same tribe) that is boxed out. For every shaykh the state favors, several others will denounce him as corrupt.”<sup>35</sup> Tribes sometimes denounce tribalism. The regime depends upon tribal support and the tribes depend upon the favor of the king. One consequence of tribal influence is its effects on those outside of it, principally those of Palestinian origin, who now constitute a majority in the state. Cherkaoui would remind us that the problem is not tribal and cultural but rather political, because the state orchestrates the role of the tribes.

In her extensive analysis of Arab thought since 1967, Kassab detects a shift from emphasis on cultural concerns, modern or traditional, Eastern or Western, toward an emphasis on the political. As she sees it, the central demand of Arab intellectuals is not cultural re-examination and reassertion but for “a humanist democracy that springs from the desire to live---that is to be free and to exist as an able human being.” The issue is no longer imitating the West or opposing it but “preventing police-state terror, ensuring basic security and freedom, and protecting oneself from endless forms of abuse---all of which are painful lived realities and not just intellectual problems.”<sup>36</sup> If Cherkaoui and Kassab are correct, the particularism inherent in the politicization of culture might be softening in favor of universalism.

In a work done near the end of his career, the literary scholar Edward Said closed his book *Culture and Imperialism* with a reminder, “No one today is purely *one* thing. . . . No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was

about.”<sup>37</sup> He was certainly a proponent of studying other cultures, but he also warned against the dangers inherent in the labels, categories, and hierarchies generated by the comparative study of civilizations and cultures and utilized as grist for the mills of both nationalism and imperialism. Said might not be surprised but he would likely be chagrined at the persistence of cultural claims and distinctions that rationalize war, repression, authoritarianism, and violence in the name of religion, morality, democracy, human rights, and more.

This investigation of politics in the Middle East and North Africa leaves me skeptical about the existence of discrete cultures, skeptical about treating cultural affinities as essential aspects of human existence, and skeptical of the political claims made in the name of culture. What I find fascinating is the degree to which all cultures are hybrids, mixtures of understandings and practices, all of them evolving as a result of social and economic change as well as the manipulation of sub-national, national, and international political forces. Culture matters because the actors involved think it does, but it is not necessarily a primary cause of political behavior. Egyptian citizens who are Copts do not necessarily think about politics differently than Muslims, but government policies, the attitudes of others, international intervention, economic realities and many other factors may render that difference significant. To understand the role of culture in any state one must first understand history and politics. Politics explains the evolution of cultural affinities better than cultural affinities explain politics in a single country or in the region as a whole.

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  3. Hazony argues that sound nations come from the loyalties developed through families, clans, and tribes, not from mere acceptance of constitutional arrangements as in the United States. Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).
  4. See Ilan Pappé, *The Modern Middle East: A Social and Cultural History*, 3<sup>rd</sup>. ed, (London: Routledge, 2014), Chap. 8, “The New Media Revolution,” for an excellent summary of this and other developments.
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