

Preface

American politics are puzzling and frustrating in ways that are blatantly audible and visible. The politics of Europe in the age of Brexit and Covid-19 have been difficult to follow from across the Atlantic but not for lack of information or transparency. Chinese politics are inscrutable because the regime does its very best to restrict efforts to report on what is actually happening. Post-Soviet politics in Russia are less opaque but nonetheless dominated by a personality and forces that systematically repress opposition voices. The politics of the Middle East and North Africa combines the two problems: too much information and too little. It is not easy to make sense of twenty some polities, each of which offers internal complexities, some of them transparent, others obscured behind authoritarian rule, interacting with each other in ways that have resulted in about ten major wars since WWII. When I tell casual acquaintances that I have spent my academic career teaching and writing about this area of the world, I am often met with expressions of pity. The challenge could discourage the faint of heart.

How is one to make sense of politics in this area of the world? European powers ventured into the Orient with a conviction of moral and cultural superiority to justify economic exploitation and military domination. The question, which became known as the Eastern Question, was which European power would control which territories when the Ottoman Empire lost its broad control. The politics of the region became virtually synonymous with the politics of Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Then came WWI and an apparent transformation that proved more fictive than genuine: France, Britain, and Italy remained in control of politics almost everywhere, even as they ostensibly were encouraging the emergence of autonomous national regimes. European politics remained the key to understanding Middle East politics, except in Turkey, which fought off European rule and formed a republic in the Anatolian peninsula.

Only after WWII did a form of regional politics, animated by local as well as international actors, re-emerge, but the initiation of the Cold War and the independence of Israel provided crutches for Western understanding and diplomacy. Countries were either friends of the Soviet Union, and inclined toward socialism, or allies of NATO, and aspirants toward liberal democracy; and they were either friends or enemies of Israel. The utility of those crutches diminished over time, as the Cold War ended and the Arab-Israeli conflict became an Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Though till a factor in regional politics, it was no longer an issue that brought together all the Arab states much less Turkey and Iran. A new level of complexity began to emerge along lines that were cultural.

The Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 brought cultural issues to the fore with its claims that it was rejecting Western models and creating an Islamic form of government.. The assassination of President Sadat of Egypt in 1981 by radicals who proclaimed him a traitor to Islam furthered the trend. Civil war in Algeria in the 1990s, Islamist revolt in Egypt in the same decade, and then the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, reinforced the notion that one should understand the politics of the MENA as a cultural war between Islam and the West. A leading U. S. political scientist, Samuel Huntington, affirmed that idea with his book *The Clash of Civilizations*, which posited cultural identity as the primary axis of international conflict with the end of the Cold War in 1989. The U. S. attack on Iraq in 2003, apparently motivated by a desire to move the entire Middle East toward liberal democratic arrangements, lent further credence to the idea that culture explained the politics of the region. The universalist pressures of liberal democracy, globalization, and human rights provoked a search for cultural authenticity almost everywhere in the region.

Why had cultural identity acquired this importance? Was this a new kind of politics or a rebirth of old ideas and impulses? How would “culture” used in this way be defined? What would

one want to know about culture in the MENA to understand why actors internal and external have made it into a salient issue in recent decades? Is culture to be regarded as a cause of political outcomes, as in the Huntington suggestion that it might foster conflict, or is it to be seen as a consequence of political action? Is culture to be seen as a constant or a variable, and, if a variable, then an independent variable (cause) or a variable dependent on non-cultural forces and actions (effect)?

Early modern thinkers including that Tunisian genius of the fourteenth century, Ibn Khaldun, took geography and climate to be determining factors of human diversity. Bedouins were products of the desert but lost their discipline and ferocity once they settled into comfortable city life. As Europe expanded its imperial domains and encountered “primitive” peoples in the nineteenth century, the question about the origin of diversity acquired greater intensity. Some seized upon the Darwinian hypothesis about biological evolution to explain it. Karl Marx argued that history revealed class as the primary source of division among human beings, and that idea survives in several forms including an understanding of the world as divided between center and periphery, capitalist core and exploited periphery. Partly in response to Marx, there emerged another school of thought that invoked the idea of culture to explain human diversity. That idea gained in prominence over the course of the twentieth century and has become pervasive in the politics of the MENA.

When Carleton Coon mapped Middle Eastern cultures in the 1950s, he argued that regional inhabitants had responded to the harsh geographical realities by developing “an elaborate division of labor on several discrete levels.” One level was ethnic. Groups identifying themselves by tribe, language, and/or religious beliefs tended to pursue and maintain economic specialties. At another level, villages, nomadic camps, and cities played different roles in a pre-industrial, pre-petroleum economies. But these so-called “traditional societies,” long relatively stable, were beginning to

disappear even as he described them. Coon observed that the non-Arab countries of the area, Turkey and Iran, were undergoing change at a more rapid pace with less apparent cultural constraint than the Arab core of the region. In a chapter added to a revised edition published in 1958, he noted that important changes were occurring in the Arab world as well: independence in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia; revolutions in Egypt and Iraq; experimental union between Egypt and Syria.¹ Urbanization, the spread of education, improved communication, increased tourism, rising revenues from petroleum, sharpened inequalities—all these forces were undermining the already complicated cultural scene that Carleton Coon so effectively described. The cultural identities he sought to describe were becoming less and less coherent and relevant.

The changes Coon detected have continued and accelerated. The lines between cultures have blurred or disappeared. Groups have redefined themselves. Languages once confined to use in religion have been transformed into vehicles of modern communication and endowed with national meaning. Practices such as veiling, once reviled as remnants of a defunct culture, have re-emerged as a cultural norm. Imported ideas and practices have become integrated into local cultures, all of which are changing. Ideas born in European intellectual circles and conveyed initially through imperialism have become part of post-colonial culture, and ideas and practices generated in the East have made their way to Europe and beyond. Cultural diversity marks every country in the world. Looking at the MENA from that perspective universalizes political experience, while it draws readers toward an understanding of what is distinct about developments in the MENA region as a whole and in the states that comprise it.

In focusing on culture, this study follows and draws upon an outpouring of academic literature on culture and politics in the last thirty years: culture as an explanation of conflict; culture transformed into ideology and a recipe for action; culture as a pillar of conservative regimes; culture

as an obstacle to the implementation of universal norms; culture as an explanation of economic and political development, culture as a set of meanings and understandings that human beings create and use for political purposes both great and small.² Should cultural affinities be understood as a determinant of politics, or should political identities be seen as the product of power and politics? How are cultural boundaries established and maintained? If simplistic cultural categories fail to explain why individuals behave the way they do, then how can we explain the continued use and abuse of such categories? How is it possible to see cultural practices as a contributor to political outcomes without regarding them as anything more permanent and substantial than habits of mind and modes of understanding created by human beings and maintained by human beings? Why do cultural issues emerge significant in certain places and time periods? Why is it that many states have difficulty dealing with the reality of cultural diversity? What distinguishes a multicultural society from one that is merely diverse? These are important issues in politics everywhere, and they have become especially important in the Middle East and North Africa

No two states are alike; trying to do justice to all of them would require a much longer book than this one, but choosing to concentrate on just a few countries is difficult, too. Focusing on the states with large populations (Iran, Turkey, and Egypt) is natural, and including Israel as a military/economic powerhouse with great following in the United States is also logical. But then? While some issues face the region as a whole, and can be treated in general terms, political activity continues to be focused on nation-states. This book treats states in groups and then tries to distinguish one from another within those groups. Recognizing that jumping from state to state can be confusing, I use some tables to clarify the process of comparison. By engaging in these broad comparisons, I try to avoid facile generalization about the whole of the region, without providing lengthy accounts of individual states. While my efforts might well be faulted on both accounts---too much or too little---but they may also offer, I hope, insight help in understanding the broad patterns

of politics in the region, marked as they have been by conflict, instability, violence, and authoritarianism. My intent is not to describe culture in general---family life, the workplace, role of the media, art and literature, educational institutions, religious activities, and so much else what might fall under that label. Historians, anthropologists, and sociologists among others have done that. Rather, I will focus on the politics of culture understood as contributing to group identity at the universal, regional, national, and sub-national levels. To what extent can the politics of cultural identity help demystify the politics of an uncommonly complicated region?

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1. Carleton S. Coon, *Caravan: The Story of the Middle East*, rev. ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1958.)
 2. Here is a sample of titles: Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*, 2nd ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, c1996); Stephanie Lawson, *Culture and Context in World Politics* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Culture Troubles: Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Lawrence E. Harrison, Samuel P. Huntington, eds. *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Marc Howard Ross, *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007); Marc Howard Ross, ed., *Culture and Belonging in Divided Societies: Contestation and Symbolic Landscapes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, c2009); Jan-Erik Lane and Uwe Wagschal, *Culture and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2012); Howard Wiarda, *Culture and Foreign Policy: The Neglected Factor in International Relations* (Farnham, UK: 2013); David Held and Henrietta L. Moore, *Cultural Politics in a Global Age: Uncertainty, Solidarity, and Innovation* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2008); Raymond Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures* (Washington: U. S. Institute of Peace Press, 1995); John R. Bowen and Roger Petersen, eds., *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic and Religious Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Armbrust, Walter, ed., *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Clifford, James, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *Reinventing Political Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012); Nader, Laura, *Culture and Dignity* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).