



"A rare combination of insightful analysis and accessibility for the general reader. I recommend it." —GLENN ROBINSON,

author of *Building a Palestinian State:*

*The Incomplete Revolution*

© 2008 UC Regents  
Buy this book

MEHRAN KAMRAVA

# THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

A POLITICAL HISTORY SINCE THE FIRST WORLD WAR

University of California Press  
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.  
London, England

© 2005 by the Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kamrava, Mehran, 1964–.

The modern Middle East : a political history since the First World  
War / Mehran Kamrava.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0–520-24149-5 (alk. paper).—ISBN 0–520-24150-9 (pbk. :  
alk. paper)

1. Middle East—History—20th century. I. Title.

DS62.8.K365 2005


956.04—dc22

2004008821

Manufactured in the United States of America

13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of  
ANSI/NISO Z39.48–1992 (R 1997) (*Permanence of Paper*).

# 1 From Islam to the Great War

Since the Middle East is home to some of the world's earliest civilizations, it is difficult to choose a starting point for examining its political history, for no matter how far back the investigator searches, there still seem to be deeper layers of historical and political developments that influenced the course of later events. For convenience, and admittedly somewhat arbitrarily, I have chosen the dawn of Islam as the starting point of this book. This has some justification: Islam as both a system of beliefs and a historical-political phenomenon has distinctively marked the Middle East, and its rise and evolution created dynamics that continue to shape the destiny of nations today.

The rise, evolution, and spread of Islam in the seventh century A.D. were greatly influenced by the geography of the region in which it was born. Islam is not unique in this respect, for any religious or political phenomenon is shaped and influenced by its geographic circumstances. Thus the chapter begins with a brief survey of that larger context. It then traces Middle Eastern history from the birth and expansion of Islam to the rise of the Ottomans and, after nearly five centuries, their ultimate collapse and replacement by European colonial powers.

Islam was born in the Arabian peninsula, a place nearly as harsh and inaccessible today as it was in the seventh century. The area was linked to the outside world primarily by the merchant caravans that left the Hijaz region (in western Arabia) for trading posts in Damascus and further north along the Silk Road. By the time of the rise of Islam, many civilizations just north of the Arabian peninsula had already gone through cycles of birth, death, and regeneration—the Akkadians, Babylonians, and Hittites chief among them—although two formidable dynasties continued to exist and, in fact, thrive. The Sassanids, concentrated to the northeast of the

Arabian peninsula along the two sides of what is now the Iran-Iraq border, were gradually restoring to the ancient Iranians some of the glory they had lost with the collapse of the Achaemenid dynasty at the hands of Alexander the Great. The other great civilization was the Byzantine Empire, whose size and powers were as impressive as the great city that bore its name. Between the Sassanids and the Byzantines lay the ruins of a few other ancient civilizations, by then long abandoned, the most notable of which were the Babylonians. With these potential intermediaries long gone, frequent quarrels erupted between the two regional giants, steadily weakening both in the process. In 330 A.D., Constantine the Great made Byzantium the capital of the Roman Empire and changed its name to Constantinople, the City of Constantine. Islam appeared in 610 A.D. and expanded dramatically after the Prophet's death nearly twenty-three years later. This expansion was greatly influenced by the conditions in which Islam found itself and the heritage of the peoples and the regions it conquered along the way.

## THE SETTING

By the time Islam appeared in the Arabian peninsula, the two other civilizations in the region, the Byzantines in the north and the Sassanids in the east, had come to adopt variations of two monotheistic religions, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, respectively. Several forms of Christianity prevailed elsewhere in the Middle East: the Coptic Church in Egypt, the Jacobite Church in Syria, and the Nestorian Church in Iraq. Parts of eastern Iraq were also Zoroastrian, as was almost all of Iran, where the tradition of divine kingship did not die out until after the Arab conquest, and even then not very thoroughly.<sup>1</sup> Jewish and pagan communities were also scattered throughout the area, including in the Arabian peninsula, where a majority worshipped local deities.<sup>2</sup>

The religious makeup of the Middle East at the time of Islam's appearance tells us much about other aspects of life in the region. With religion came the increasing differentiation of authority and the development of religious and administrative hierarchies. Depending on local circumstances and conditions, local priests (*mobads* for Zoroastrians), bishops, and popes could become tremendously influential in the day-to-day lives of ordinary people, some even influencing the fates of entire dynasties. Places of worship and congregation also assumed importance not only for articulating and perpetuating religious values but as sources of local organization and mobilization. Equally important was the use and manipulation of religion

by existing or aspiring political leaders, whether at the level of the local community or the empire, the most brilliant manifestation of which could be found in Constantinople.<sup>3</sup>

Life was organized, and still is today, into three distinct but at times interrelated communities. First were urban communities, cities where markets and money economies had been firmly established,<sup>4</sup> elaborate political and administrative apparatuses had been set up, and religious power and authority, as well as liturgy and customs, had evolved.<sup>5</sup> In broad, historical terms, cities in the Middle East can be divided into pre-Islamic and Islamic ones. With the rise and expansion of Islam, a few cities gradually died out as they ceased being centers of economic and political power. The Sassanid capital of Ctesiphon, near present-day Baghdad, is a case in point. Many more cities were established anew or grew out of military encampments. Kufa and Basra in southern Mesopotamia, Fustat in Egypt, Qayrawan in Tunisia, and, somewhat later, Marv in northeastern Iran were among the more notable in this group of cities.<sup>6</sup> Still others were changed not just in name but also in their political and historical significance. For example, Yathrib, a town north of Mecca, became Medina and the capital of Prophet Muhammad's new Islamic state. Some eight centuries later and under very different circumstances, Constantinople became Istanbul and the capital of an expanding Ottoman Empire.

While Islam has essentially been an urban religion, in both its genesis and its later evolution, there have been two other types of Middle Eastern communities as well: relatively small and often isolated villages; and tribes of nomads, many of whom were called bedouins (literally, "desert dwellers"). Both developed as a result of the "Neolithic Revolution," which began around 6000 B.C. and involved the development of agriculture and the domestication of new types of animals.<sup>7</sup> The proportion of villages and nomadic tribes appears to have oscillated depending on political currents and the rise and fall of local dynasties.<sup>8</sup> On the whole, strong central authority, and the concomitant security of the subject population from banditry and lawlessness, favored urbanization and the growth of cities. Political authority and urbanization assumed a mutually reinforcing relationship. With the decline of central authority and increasing levels of physical and economic insecurity, some of the less firmly settled urban groups or those in smaller towns and villages found it beneficial to migrate.<sup>9</sup> The reliance of many of these groups on camels and horses, and thus the search for pastures and oases, made migration for many nomads a seasonal or a semipermanent necessity. Dynastic declines did not directly give rise to nomadic and other tribal groups. But they certainly appear to

have added to their numbers. Throughout the centuries, the center of political and imperial power shifted from one city and region to another several times—from Medina to Damascus, then to Baghdad, and eventually to Istanbul, with Cairo, Cordoba, and Esfahan experiencing their own power fluctuations. Each time the center of political power shifted, the fortunes of the populations in the nearby areas changed as well.

As everywhere, particular patterns of population dispersion and settlements in the Middle East have been greatly influenced by the region's geography. As is well known, the great river systems of the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates became cradles of civilizations. Along their banks grew two of the most magnificent cities, Cairo and Baghdad. Wealth and power here depended on the ability to dig and manage canals and other irrigation systems, thus giving rise to "hydraulic" states whose administrative powers and popular legitimacy rested on their ability to organize large numbers of workers successfully, maintain canals and other sources of irrigation, and manage and distribute the resulting agricultural yields.<sup>10</sup> But such river systems are few and far between in the Middle East, and the region, known for its aridity, is mostly filled with large expanses of desert and jagged mountains.<sup>11</sup> At the foot of these low-lying mountains grew some of the Middle East's other major cities: Mecca and Medina in the Hijaz, Sanaa in Yemen, Esfahan and Shiraz in Iran, Konya and Bursa in Turkey, and Marrakesh and Rabat in Morocco, to name a few. Inhospitable to similarly large urban settlements, the desert did not become home to larger cities save for a few, such as Yazd and Kerman in Iran, Riyadh and Buraydah in Saudi Arabia, Waddan in Libya, and Adrar in Algeria. Rather, the desert saw the proliferation of numerous isolated village and rural communities, existing alongside migratory nomadic tribes. Middle Eastern cities nevertheless experienced a decline in size, number, and importance beginning in the sixteenth century and would not regain their preeminence until some four centuries later.<sup>12</sup> Up until the 1950s, an overwhelming majority of people in the Middle East lived in villages, and to this day there are estimates of some fifty-five thousand villages in Iran and approximately forty thousand in Turkey, to name only two examples.<sup>13</sup> Despite annual rates of urbanization of 4.5 to 5 percent from 1980 to 1995, some 40 percent of the peoples of the Middle East still live in village or tribal communities.<sup>14</sup> To this day, the urban populations of Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, and Yemen are less than 50 percent, and some 20 to 50 percent of the populations of Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Tunisia live outside the cities.<sup>15</sup>

This aspect of Middle Eastern geography—the development of one or two primary cities in each country and the widespread prevalence of village

and other rural forms of life—has had a dual effect on the region's political history. On the one hand, population concentration in large cities has helped facilitate the establishment of central authority in the city due to social needs for order, physical and economic security, and, in cities close to bodies of water, maintenance of canals and irrigation facilities. On the other hand, the dispersion of populations outside the walls of the city and in remote and mostly inaccessible areas has often resulted in the state's inability to effectively establish its authority over the areas it has claimed to control. This was especially the case in places where river valleys were uncommon—that is, most of the Middle East—where, instead of centralized, hydraulic states, confederations made up of different local rulers emerged.<sup>16</sup> With the diffusion of power and lack of central authority came problems of state penetration and control, exacerbated during the rule of the Ottomans, who sought to govern the multiple provinces of their vast empire through a carefully devised system of loose control. The outcome, as we shall see later, was national entities that at best came into only partial contact with political institutions, whether indigenous or imposed from Istanbul. The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the Great War by victorious European powers, namely France and Britain, and the mandatory system through which they ruled only compounded the problem.

Religion, political administration, economic activities, place of residence, and other forms of shared experiences provide a sense of cultural identity. A discussion of the complex, evolving cultural identities in the Middle East is beyond the scope of this book. But despite the universalism of Islam and those of the dynasties that claimed its mantle at one point or another, distinct if somewhat related cultural identities were formed relatively early on, whereby the Other was distinguished from the collective self. Naturally, with the progression of history and the changing nuances of empires and dynasties, cultural identities—wrapped in symbols and folklore, flags, oral traditions, and ways of life—were transformed and muted but never quite universalized. Many, in fact, later became rallying cries around which dormant animosities erupted and led to cross-national or even intranational conflicts and war. The Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, for example, had cultural and historical roots that were deeper than mere disagreements over boundaries, as did the sectarian strife that tore Lebanon apart for some fifteen years beginning in 1975.

Within this larger context the political history of the Middle East has taken place. Retelling the narrative of this history is beyond the scope of this book, and it has been masterfully told by many others.<sup>17</sup> What follows

are some of the more important highlights as they have shaped the region's history and its current social, political, and economic landscapes.

## THE RISE AND EXPANSION OF ISLAM

Muhammad ibn-Abdullah, Muhammad the son of Abdullah, was born in the city of Mecca in the Hijaz in 570 A.D.<sup>18</sup> Mecca had emerged as an affluent and powerful caravan city for two principal reasons. First, it housed the shrine of Ka'ba, where Abraham was said to have offered his sacrifice to God, and it had thus become an important destination for pagan worshippers whose belief systems included paying homage to that holy site. Mecca was also the halfway point along the lucrative incense-trading route between Yemen in the south and Syria in the north, making it a potentially attractive resting place for passing traders. One of the more intriguing theses about the preeminence of Mecca is presented by the historian Richard Bulliet, who attributes it to the city's ability to control the surrounding camel-breeding tribes. These tribes could both supply transportation and, more importantly, raid caravans. Gradually, the thesis holds, the Meccans organized the tribes so that they would manage trade rather than raid caravans, leading to a rise in the city's importance.<sup>19</sup>

Muhammad belonged to the Quraysh tribe, who had settled in and eventually dominated the city approximately a century earlier. Nevertheless, since its very founding Mecca had lacked central authority. Muhammad was not born into the most influential clan of the Quraysh. He lost both parents at an early age and was raised by his uncle, Abu Talib. As a young man, Muhammad worked for a caravan owner named Khadija, a woman twice widowed and with some wealth. She proposed to him, and the two married. Fifteen years his senior, Khadija bore Muhammad six children, four daughters and two sons, although only the daughters survived into adulthood. Khadija later became the first convert to Muhammad's religion, and he remained devoted to her throughout her life. Despite sanctioning multiple marriages and later practicing them himself, he did not marry anyone else until after Khadija's passing.

Disenchanted with the paganism of fellow Meccans, in 610 A.D., during one of his frequent visits to the nearby Mount Hira, Muhammad was visited by the archangel Gabriel and given the command to recite (*iqra* in Arabic) what was to become verse 1 of chapter (*surah*) 96 of the Quran (recitations): "Recite in the name of your Lord who created." God (Lah), Muhammad was told, was one (Al-Lah, the God), and man must submit to his will. Life was to be reordered on the basis of submission (*islam*) to God.



Besides Khadija, the earliest converts to Islam included some of Muhammad's closest relatives and friends, and among this group of companions (Sahabah) the new religion was practiced in secret for approximately three years. This secrecy was deemed necessary due to the revolutionary nature of Muhammad's message. The core principles of the new religion challenged the social and economic balance on which the life of Meccans had come to rely. In a setting where kinship and tribal affiliation determined everything from physical security to social and economic status, the call to replace tribal loyalties with submission to a single divine being shook the foundations of Arabian society. The Prophet's divine message caused the Meccan elites both practical and doctrinal problems. From a practical point of view, Islam upset the prevailing social and cultural balance of forces within Mecca. Doctrinally, it challenged deeply held beliefs about the sanctity of the city's three main goddesses.<sup>20</sup> Among other things, Meccans worried that the spread of a monotheistic heresy would damage their reputation before the three primary idol gods—Lat, Manat, and Uzza—and, more importantly, would discourage fellow pagan traders from passing through Mecca and paying homage to the shrine of Ka'ba.

Sometime around 613 A.D., Muhammad began to openly call on people to join his religion and to observe its evolving rites and principles. The anger of the Meccan elite was swift and intense. Some interpretations of Islam see the mention of the goddesses Lat, Manat, and Uzza in the Quran as an attempt by the Prophet to compromise with the Meccan elites, who during much of his life vehemently opposed his prophecy.<sup>21</sup> But not until around September 622 A.D. did Muhammad and his followers leave Mecca for the northern town of Yathrib, at the invitation of the city's notables, where they established a city par excellence, the City, Al Medina. During this flight (*hijrah*) the Prophet affirmed his support among the believers and declared the beginning of a new (lunar) calendar.<sup>22</sup> The year 622 A.D., therefore, is 1 A.H. (After Hijrah) in the Islamic calendar.

Here in Medina the first Islamic state was established and attained significant political and military power. The Prophet's entry into the city was facilitated by the signing of a series of treaties whereby the emigrant Meccans (Muhajerun) and the citizens of Medina would live in peace, act as one community (*umma*) while keeping their customs and laws, and bring their disputes to be solved by Muhammad.<sup>23</sup> In a sense, these agreements constituted one of the earliest written constitutions in the Middle East, spelling out the details of operation for what was to become an emerging empire's nerve center.<sup>24</sup> Chief among these agreements was the Compact

of Medina, as the Prophet's main treaty with residents of Medina came to be known. Also referred to as a "constitution" of sorts, the compact included thirty articles, which, among other provisions, assured the protection and equality of the city's Jewish tribes. The Jews "who attached themselves to our Commonwealth," it said, "shall be protected from all insult and vexation. . . . [T]hey shall have an equal right with our own people to our assistance and good offices."<sup>25</sup>

Initially, Medina included some enemies of the Prophet: both pagans and the so-called Hypocrites (Munafiqun, also called the Doubters), whose allegiance to the Prophet was suspect at best. Despite the signing of the Compact of Medina, the Muslims also found themselves in frequent conflict with the city's Jewish populations. The Jewish tribes were eventually subdued, and the Prophet's other enemies were also steadily neutralized. Some were even killed. The Prophet became the leader of a thriving community of believers, the *umma*. Over time, he instituted detailed social and cultural reforms, economic principles, and political practices designed to run the city.

Steadily, the legal foundations of the evolving *umma* were laid out in the Quran. The Quran is not a "legislative document" in that it does not outline the features of an incipient Islamic political order. Instead, it includes various detailed pronouncements on proper conduct and social relations, including inheritance laws, marital relations, relations with non-Muslims, and punishments for crimes such as theft and adultery.<sup>26</sup> Gradually, especially after the Prophet's death, there developed three additional sources of Islamic jurisprudence: the Sunna (collections of accounts of the deeds and actions of the Prophet, regarded as "the perfect model of behavior"); *ijma* (consensus); and *qiyas* (analogical reasoning).<sup>27</sup> Together, these became the four foundations of *sharia*, commonly referred to as "Islamic law" but more correctly meaning "comprehensive principle of *total way of life*"—spiritual, mental, and physical.<sup>28</sup>

Of a total of 114 *surahs* contained in the Quran, 88 were revealed in Mecca and only 26 in Medina. However, the Meccan verses tend to be less elaborate and were designed primarily to lay down the foundations of the nascent religion. The Medinian *surahs* tend to be more elaborate and their subjects more specific.<sup>29</sup> The present form in which the Quran appears is based, not on the chronological order in which its contents were revealed to the Prophet, but on the order in which the Prophet is said to have arranged and recited the verses by heart during the month of Ramadan. This version was adopted and standardized during the reign of the third caliph, Uthman, from 644 to 655 A.D.<sup>30</sup>

Many of the principles of Islam were enunciated in Medina, some in response to existing or evolving predicaments. There are important connections between some of these religious principles and the nature and operations of the emerging Islamic state. Divisiveness and bitter rivalries marked the polities first of Mecca and, to much greater extent, of Medina and its environs. It is not coincidental that one of the most powerful features of Islam is its emphasis on the community and the importance of its cohesion. The five pillars of Islam—prayer, fasting, tithing, pilgrimage to Mecca, and proclaiming belief in the religion—demonstrate the importance placed on communal solidarity. Although there is no evidence to suggest that any of the pillars were devised by the Prophet specifically for political purposes, once he was in Medina they did help strengthen the solidarity and cohesion of the Muslim community. Each pillar has a strong communal aspect: communal prayers in mosques on Fridays, a day whose Arabic translation, *jum'ah*, means “community” or “congregation”; the rituals attached to fasting in the month of Ramadan; the economic and financial obligation to support the community through tithes; the ritual pilgrimage to Mecca, the *hajj*, in conjunction with other believers; and the profession of faith by reciting the same, brief Quranic verse.

The Muslims of Medina at first supported themselves by raiding caravans, a common practice at the time, but gradually gained enough confidence to turn their attention toward Mecca. The Muslims and the Meccans fought a series of battles—in 624, 625, and 627—with inconclusive results. Finally, in 628, Muhammad signed a truce with the Meccan elite, whereby he and his followers were allowed to perform the *hajj* the following year. The treaty also allowed Muhammad to subdue some of the northerly tribes allied with the Meccans. In 630, Mecca itself submitted to the Prophet of Islam virtually without resistance. In less than two years, in 632, Muhammad died in his house in Medina. The city's central mosque, which he had also used as his administrative headquarters, became his last resting place.

Almost immediately, the Prophet's death unleashed two contradictory yet reinforcing developments. On the one hand, under the rule of his successors, the territories under the control of Islamic armies grew rapidly and dramatically. The early expansion was on two fronts, against the Byzantine Empire in Syria and from there on to North Africa, and against the Sassanids in Iraq and Iran. Damascus capitulated in 635, and Jerusalem was occupied in 638. A military encampment named Fustat was built on the Nile in 641, from which the fall of Alexandria was secured the following year. By 661 most of Byzantine Africa (Libya and Tunisia) was in Muslim

hands, and Muslim domination over all of North Africa was complete by 700. The armies of Islam crossed into Spain via the Straits of Gibraltar beginning in 710, and Cordoba was captured in 712. The campaign against the Sassanids was similarly swift and decisive: the Persian armies suffered defeat in 637 and then again in 642. By 653, Muslim control over Iran was complete, and by the early decades of the eighth century it reached as far as western China.<sup>31</sup>

These expansions only magnified the multiple divisions within the Muslim community that the Prophet's death had brought to the surface. Geographic and ethnolinguistic divisions proliferated as the abode of Islam expanded. But there were initially far more serious divisions over the question of the *umma's* leadership and the legitimacy of the Prophet's successors (caliphs).<sup>32</sup> Upon the Prophet's death, the leadership of the Muslim community passed on to four caliphs, collectively referred to as the Rashidun, or Rightly Guided Ones, due to their close companionship with the Prophet and their early conversion to Islam: Abu Bakr (632–34), Umar (634–44), Uthman (644–56), and Ali (656–61). However, as the empire grew and the economic and territorial stakes became higher, policy disagreements arose, and opposition, both from within and from the outside, grew. Uthman's policies aimed at centralizing tax collection, along with his preferential treatment of Meccan notables, provoked his murder by a group of disenchanting Arabs. His successor, Ali, suffered a similar fate at the hands of a man belonging to a group of zealots called the Kharajis (secessionists), who faulted him for agreeing to a council hearing on the murder of Uthman.<sup>33</sup>

Two civil wars would soon erupt, largely but not solely over the festering issue of succession, from 656 to 661 and again from 680 to 692. The cumulative result of these two wars was the emergence of an unbridgeable chasm between a minority of "partisans," the Shi'ites, and the majority of "traditionalists," the Sunnis. Ali was the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, as well as one of the earliest converts to Islam. His caliphate caused a major conflict between two approaches to the question of succession, one "devoid of notions of hereditary sanctity" based on lineage ties to the Prophet and the other emphasizing these notions. Along with practical political and economic considerations, the notion of succession based on blood ties was later to become the most divisive issue separating Shi'as and Sunnis.<sup>34</sup> At the core of the conflict was the question of who should succeed Ali and what his proper functions ought to be: the Shi'ites maintained that Ali was the only rightful caliph and that only his descendants should follow him; the Sunnis, on the other hand, accepted the caliphate

rule of Mu'awiya, Uthman's cousin and the governor of Damascus, who had declared himself caliph.

Upon Ali's death in 661, Mu'awiya prevailed and moved the seat of the Islamic state from Medina to Damascus. Hailing from the Umayyad clan within the Quraysh, he established the Umayyad caliphate, which lasted for nearly a century until 750. Thanks in large measure to the efforts of the dynasty's founder, the Umayyads established a centralized, de facto dynasty, initiated administrative measures for running their expanding domain, issued gold and silver coins (the *dinar* and the *dirham*, respectively), introduced fiscal reforms and institutionalized tax collection, and significantly added to the size of the territory under their control. This is not to suggest that the Umayyads were able to establish a stable caliphate or ruled over quiescent populations. In fact, many of their development projects, which enriched members of the political elite and raised the tax burden on ordinary people, were so deeply resented that Yezid III (r. 744) promised not to undertake the construction of new buildings or canals.<sup>35</sup>

With the gradual routinization of the dynasty came new challenges, many of which the later Umayyad caliphs were ill prepared to handle. One of these challenges revolved around the treatment, and in turn the loyalty, of the growing population of non-Muslim and recent converts to Islam (*mawali*) under Umayyad suzerainty.<sup>36</sup> Although some individuals from these groups could reach very high offices in the Umayyad court, they were still subject to discrimination and at times even maltreatment. Adam Mez, the German scholar of Islam, has made the following observation about the status of religious minorities during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates:

The most amazing feature of the Islamic Government is the number of non-Muslim officers in state service. In his own Empire the Muslim was ruled by Christians. Old is the complaint that the decision over the life and property of Muslims lay in the hand of protected subjects. . . . Twice in the 3/9 century even the war Ministers were non-Muslims with the result that the "defenders of the faith" had to kiss their hands and obey their commands.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, it was from among the *mawali* in eastern Iran that a movement to unseat the Umayyads was set in motion, leading to the eventual establishment of the Abbasid dynasty in 750, this time in a newly built city, the magnificent Baghdad. The Umayyads, however, did not completely disappear. Abd al-Rahman I, a member of the extended Umayyad family, found his way to North Africa and then Spain, where he established a rival Islamic state.

## THE HIGH CALIPHATE

Historians have generally referred to the reigns of the Umayyads and the Abbasids as the era of the high caliphate, a designation based on the scope of their rule; the unity they fostered among their subjects, albeit not always successfully; the magnificence of their capital cities; and, especially for the Abbasids, their patronage of the arts and the sciences. With the rise of the Abbasids came significant changes in the social and political life of the empire and, consequently, new challenges. With the caliphate's encouragement, Baghdad became an important intellectual center, and the imperial court patronized many artistic and scientific endeavors. By the same token, differing religious opinions and trends, a relic of Umayyad rule, proliferated, and the differences among them deepened. As a dynasty heavily reliant on religion as its primary source of legitimacy, the Abbasids grew increasingly sensitive to such ongoing debates and found themselves having to take sides among the different theoreticians to protect their reign.<sup>38</sup> As a general rule, the Abbasid caliphs went to great lengths to portray themselves as pious Muslims. The legendary caliph Harun al-Rashid once even walked from Medina to Mecca to earn divine merit.<sup>39</sup> But the royal court also became infamous for its pursuit of worldly pleasures, including wine and women.<sup>40</sup> Equally detrimental to the power and popularity of the Abbasids was the deliberate distance they cultivated between themselves and the populace. In many ways, the Abbasid caliph came to view himself in the same light as the old Persian kings: the King of Kings, or, alternatively, the Shadow of God on Earth. In either case, the Abbasids became distant, regal elites ruling over subject populations. The historian Von Grunebaum writes of them: "The court, the family of the caliph, his household servants, guards and administrators were the center of the empire; the standing with the ruler determines rank and influence. His favour raises the menial from nothing, his disfavour plunges him back into nothing."<sup>41</sup>

Before long, these developments had combined to weaken the Abbasids from within. As their rule was racked by rebellions and secessionist movements, as well as doctrinal and intellectual disputes, their power, prestige, and influence declined markedly after 945. First, the powerful Buyid family of northwestern Iran established itself as the "protector" of the Abbasid caliph from 945 to 1055, essentially turning the caliphal clan into mere figureheads. The Turkish Saljuqs similarly dominated Baghdad from 1055 until the middle of the twelfth century. The Abbasids, or what remained of them, were finally overrun in 1258 by the invading Mongols. By then, the Abbasid Empire had already started coming apart. Ruling clans within the

different territories had begun to exercise considerable local autonomy. A revived Umayyad dynasty ruled Spain. Abbasid hegemony was also challenged in North Africa, where a Shi'ite group eventually conquered Egypt in 969, established the Fatimid dynasty, and built a new capital city called Cairo (al Qahirah, the conqueror) along the Nile. The conquerors of Egypt were soon caught up by what may be called the "Pharaoh syndrome," which appears to have plagued many of Egypt's rulers, both ancient and contemporary. Their court was replete with splendor and ritual, the center of a city victorious and grand.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, the first wave of Crusaders were sent from Europe to Jerusalem to protect the Christian Byzantine emperor in Constantinople from the menacing Muslims, further weakening the Abbasids and even the Fatimids. Here a Kurdish general by the name of Salah al-Din (Saladin) distinguished himself in bravery and eventually became the sultan of Egypt after the death of the last Fatimid caliph in 1171. Saladin's control of Egypt was initially in the name of the Abbasid caliph. In 1175, Baghdad recognized his sultanate over Egypt, Yemen, Palestine, and Syria, areas where Saladin was already in de facto control. On October 2, 1178, he also occupied Jerusalem and wrested its control from the Crusaders. But the Ayyubid dynasty that he established did not last long, having to rely on ex-slave soldiers, called Mamluks, to defend itself against the invading Mongols. The Mongol conquest had started in earnest in Asia Minor in 1219, overrunning Iran and in turn establishing the Ilkhanid dynasty there from 1256 to 1336. The Mamluks, meanwhile, established a dynasty of their own in Egypt in 1250, not to be overthrown until the advent of the Ottomans in 1517.

The Mongol conquests simply facilitated the release throughout the Middle East of centrifugal forces that had made their presence felt as early as the middle of the tenth century. In fact, many of these tendencies had never quite disappeared but had simply been obscured as peoples rallied around the common banner of Islam. The Mongol invasion of Iran was intense, bloody, and devastating. When the Mongols captured the city of Marv, for example, they reportedly killed some seven hundred thousand inhabitants, laying farmlands and entire cities to waste and carrying off thousands of Muslim artisans to Mongolia as slaves.<sup>43</sup> But in larger historical terms the invasion was relatively brief. Before long, the Mongols had established an increasingly Persianized dynasty of their own in Iran, the Ilkhanids, which tried to reverse some of the devastation of the earlier decades by encouraging public works and patronizing the arts. Under their patronage, painting and manuscript illustration, the recording of history,

and the building of monuments, especially tombs, flourished.<sup>44</sup> The Ilkhanids collapsed by 1336, and a succession of smaller states emerged in areas previously under their control. A similar fate had befallen the earlier Saljuqs, who in the middle of the eleventh century had taken control of most of Anatolia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, only to be broken up into smaller states soon afterward. Geographic circumstances and other administrative and bureaucratic limitations had forced both the Saljuqs and the Ilkhanids to rely on local, mostly landed elites to maintain their suzerainty.<sup>45</sup> This very decentralization and diffusion of power would not only germinate their own collapse but also facilitate conditions for the rise of their eventual successors, the Ottomans in Anatolia and the Safavids in Iran.

## THE OTTOMANS

One of the more significant side effects of the radical political shifts in the Middle East was the steady ascent to power of a small Turkic tribe known by the name of one of its earliest leaders. The Ottomans originated in northwestern Anatolia, not far from the city that most rulers had dreamt of conquering one day, the magnificent Constantinople. The Ottomans were the beneficiaries of the declining powers of the Saljuqs in Anatolia, where in 1281 a chieftain's son named Osman conquered new territories and set out to defeat the Byzantine Empire. The Ottomans expanded quickly throughout Anatolia and by 1345 had crossed over the narrow Bosphorus Straits into Europe. In 1389 they scored a decisive victory in the Battle of Kosovo and established control over the western Balkans. Historical record indicates that the Ottoman advances into Europe, reinforced by the frequent settlement in major Balkan cities of Anatolians accompanying the troops, were not always deeply resented by the local populations. In fact,

the Balkan peasant soon came to appreciate that conquest by the Moslem invader spelled for him liberation from Christian feudal power, whose manifold exactions and abuses had worsened with the increase of monastic lands. Ottomanization was now conferring upon him unforeseen benefits. Not the least of them were law and order. As a French traveller was to write, "The country is safe, and there are no reports of brigands or highwaymen"—more than could be said, at that time, of other realms in Christendom.<sup>46</sup>

The grand prize remained elusive, however. Only in 1453, after a harrowing two-month siege, was Constantinople finally captured by the



twenty-two-year-old Sultan Mehmet II, the Conqueror (Fatih), who declared it his new capital. The city gradually came to be called Istanbul. The new name was a corruption of the original "Constantinople," which was later pronounced Stinopol, Stinpol, Estantbul, and, eventually, Istanbul.

Had they not been separated in time from the Abbasids by some four centuries, the Ottomans, at least in their first century, would surely have deserved the esteemed designation of high caliphate as well. From the plains of Anatolia the Ottomans rose to become a world empire, uniting the Middle East under their rule from the Balkans in the northwest to the Hijaz in the south, going as far in North Africa as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria. The official government in Istanbul became known to Europeans as the Sublime Porte (first the Bab-i Homayun and then the Bab-i Ali in Ottoman Turkish, after one of the gates in the Grand Vizier's residence), from where much of the Middle East and North Africa was administered. Only Iran remained outside the Ottomans' control. There, in 1501, a militant Shi'ite Sufi named Ismail, at the time only thirteen years old, rose to prominence and established the Safavid dynasty.

The Ottoman centuries can generally be divided into three periods. The first period, from the early establishment of the dynasty around 1280 to the end of the reign of Suleyman I (r. 1520–66), was one of unprecedented growth in the power, prestige, and territorial size of the empire. This era coincides with the reign of the dynasty's first ten sultans, all of whom were, on the whole, capable administrators, successful military commanders, and wise rulers. Also during this period the Ottomans emerged as a "gunpowder empire" par excellence due to their military tactics and their technology, conquering lands in Europe and the Middle East.<sup>47</sup> This military prowess was buttressed by a highly disciplined, well-trained corps of infantrymen called the janissaries, many of whom were drafted into the service of the empire at childhood and were raised as either future administrators or soldiers. The janissaries were provided with firearms and "used phalanx tactics to combine massed musket firepower with artillery."<sup>48</sup>

The second period, beginning approximately after 1566 and lasting until the early 1800s, was in many ways the beginning of the end. This was a time of frequent military defeats, territorial retreat and retrenchment, administrative decay, and industrial underdevelopment. Most of the territorial and military reversals occurred in Europe: the failure to capture Vienna in 1683; ceding Hungary to the Hapsburgs and the Aegean coast to the Venetians in 1699; another massive territorial concession in a

1718 treaty; loss of the Crimean War to Russia in 1774; and the loss of Egypt to Napoleon in 1798.<sup>49</sup> When Egypt was reclaimed in 1791, its military governor, the modernizing Muhammad Ali, grew so strong as to challenge Ottoman suzerainty over Egypt and Syria. Only with European help were the Ottomans able to regain Syria, but their loss of Egypt was permanent. Muhammad Ali was to establish an Egyptian dynasty that lasted until 1952.

There were, to be certain, occasional victories. In 1711, the Ottomans forced the surrender of the Russians at the river Pruth, and in 1715 the Greek provinces were recovered from Venice. But, in the words of the historian Andrew Wheatcroft, "whenever an Ottoman army met a European army on roughly equal terms the result was invariably a defeat for the Turks."<sup>50</sup> This was not a product of the Ottoman soldiers' lack of bravery or, on occasion, the ingenuity of their commanders. More often, it was a product of the innate conservatism and lack of adaptability that permeated the whole Ottoman system of rule, including warfare and conquest. "By the end of the eighteenth century," Wheatcroft continues, "the sultan's soldiers had not varied their equipment or method of war for more than two hundred years."<sup>51</sup>

There were multiple causes for the steady decline of the once mighty empire. Principally, however, decay began at the top, with the royal court and the janissaries. The janissaries increasingly lost their strict discipline, and the quality of their training deteriorated as many began using their positions for other, often personal pursuits. At one point they grew so powerful that they massacred most male members of the dynasty for fear of being disbanded, and it was not until 1826 that they were successfully attacked by the sultan and neutralized. The end came after the janissaries mutinied a second time against proposed reforms, when in a surprise move Sultan Mahmud ordered palace troops to open fire on the advancing janissary corps and then bombarded the barracks to which they had retreated. In the coming months, thousands of janissaries were killed, and the sultan proclaimed the formation of a new army, to be called "the Victorious Muhammeden Soldierly."<sup>52</sup>

There was also an unfortunate string of incompetent sultans who ascended to the throne beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century, many often far more interested in the pursuit of worldly pleasures than in attending to the affairs of the state. There were, of course, exceptions. Mahmud II (r. 1808–39), for example, implemented major reforms in the latter part of his reign. A number of reforming grand viziers also made



**Figure 1.** Turkish women in a late nineteenth-century harem. © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS.

their mark on the royal court, especially in the 1840s to the 1860s, and brought about significant improvements to the functions of the caliphate state. Nevertheless, on the whole, the overall quality of government saw a precipitous decline over time.<sup>53</sup>

Equally important was the gradual ascendancy of Russian imperial power, and, to a lesser extent, that of Hapsburg Austria and later Britain. In relation to Europe, the pattern of declining Ottoman power is unmistakable: superiority in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, parity in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and steady decline thereafter, so that the Ottoman Empire eventually became the “sick man of Europe.”<sup>54</sup> This growing imbalance of power between the Ottomans and the West was partly military and diplomatic and partly historical. Equally culpable was “the soft embrace of Ottoman traditionalism,” with military commanders and also rulers, including the few “modernizing sultans,” ultimately preferring the old ways.<sup>55</sup> For whatever reasons, the Ottomans did not experience the profound, historic changes that were sweeping across western Europe from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries—the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution. Consequently, they entered into the eighteenth century economically, technologically, and militarily far weaker than most of their traditional European adversaries.

The third period began in the nineteenth century, when it became increasingly clear that the empire as a whole and the dynasty in particular were afflicted with a systemic malaise, one whose cure necessitated fundamental reforms. This was the era of reforms and, eventually, demise. Increasingly aware of the empire’s industrial and technological backwardness in relation to Europe, a succession of Ottoman sultans and their viziers, or chief ministers, sought to revamp the empire’s central administration, reinvigorate the army, give order to the chaotic and inefficient tax collection system, and introduce modern industrial machinery (such as printing presses). This was the gist of the Nizam-i Jedid (New Order) as instituted by Sultan Selim III (r. 1789–1807), the inspiration for which was a similar set of reforms implemented in France after the French Revolution.<sup>56</sup> But such changes were often threatening to the established political and economic hierarchy, not the least of whom were courtiers and the *ulama* (Muslim clerics), who eventually saw to it that Selim was deposed and his New Order halted. A second attempt at reforming the empire occurred during the reign of Sultan Abdulmejid from 1839 to 1876, the era of Tanzimat, or reorganization. Among other changes, the Tanzimat saw the introduction of a postal

system (1834), telegraph (1855), steamships, and the beginning of railway construction in 1866.<sup>57</sup>

These and other changes had slowly engendered the rise of new classes of articulate modernists. By far the most important of these were two generations of Ottoman subjects, the so-called "Young Ottomans," who came to prominence around 1867, and the "Young Turks," who in July 1908 spearheaded a revolution of sorts by forcing the sultan to reinstate the long-suspended constitution of 1876. Inspired by the political ideals prevalent in Europe and dazzled by the industrial accomplishments of Britain, yet remaining committed to their Islamic religion and Ottoman heritage, both groups sought to reform the system from within. With their attempts at turning the dynasty into a constitutional parliamentary system, presumably along the Westminster model, they gave rise to a number of different, competing factions. By the early years of the twentieth century, the idea of a multinational, multireligious empire had become increasingly untenable, and the birth of local national identities and loyalties was tearing the empire apart. This problem was not unique to the Ottoman Empire. At about roughly the same time, the two other dynasties bordering the Ottomans, the Hapsburgs to the west and the Qajars to the east, also faced crises that threatened their very survival, eventually leading to their collapse. Though the specific causes of the crises facing the imperial household were different in each case, the Ottomans and the Hapsburgs shared similar challenges in ruling over vast, multinational territories.<sup>58</sup>

Within less than two decades, those who still hoped to retain the empire in its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century form had all hopes dashed by the advent of the Great War in 1914. The Young Turk movement, meanwhile, had given rise to the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP), which was resolutely secular and a firm believer in the idea of "Turkish nationalism" as compared to "Ottomanism." Backed by modernist elements within the military, the CUP assumed power in 1912, keeping the sultan as a titular head. Until the end of its rule in 1918, the CUP governed by decree, embarking, among other things, on a rapid program of secularizing schools and the judicial system, repressing Christian minorities and the Muslim *ulama*, and seeking to Turkify the various (Arab) provinces.<sup>59</sup> Millions of Armenians were expelled, and one and a half million of them were massacred because they were suspected of collaboration with the Russians and because their large-scale, historic presence in the Turkish heartland was now seen as inimical to the project of Turkish state building.<sup>60</sup> The powers and responsibilities

of the *ulama* were also severely curtailed, and the idea of Turkish nationalism was constantly propagated. Despite their tumultuous involvement in politics, however, by 1918 the Young Turks' ideal of a constitutional government was no closer to reality than when they had first come into power.<sup>61</sup>

The death of the Ottomans took a few, painful years. The empire reluctantly entered the war on Germany's side at the beginning of the Great War. Britain and its allies in turn decided to chip away at the Ottomans' Middle Eastern provinces. Russian advances in Anatolia were halted only after the 1917 communist revolution. That same year Britain captured Baghdad, and Jerusalem fell a year later. A rebellion calling for independence also broke out among the Arab population of the Hijaz. The Ottoman Empire was being systematically dismembered.

The war raised the fortunes of one Ottoman general, a certain Mustafa Kemal, whose strategic genius had spared his forces from defeat in all the military campaigns in which they were involved.<sup>62</sup> As the war was drawing to a close in 1918, the Young Turk government in Istanbul went into hiding and Kemal took over the reins of power. For the next three years he fought a series of successful military campaigns against the Armenian republic in the Caucasus, the French in Cilicia, and the Greeks in central Anatolia, as well as Ottoman troops remaining loyal to the sultan. Emerging victorious, in 1921 he established a Grand National Assembly in the interior city of Ankara and promulgated a new, republican constitution the following year. The Turkish republic was proclaimed on October 29, 1923. That same year the independence of Turkey and its present boundaries were recognized by the Treaty of Lausanne. Mustafa Kemal was declared president for life. In the coming decades, Kemal (d. 1938) and his successors methodically set out to dismantle the political, sociocultural, and religious vestiges of Ottoman rule. The era of the Ottomans and everything they stood for—the caliphate, Turko-Islamic tradition, social and cultural conservatism, rule over disparate *millet*s (religious communities)—came to a dramatic end, and a new era of Kemalist republicanism began.

## THE SAFAVIDS AND THE QAJARS

To the east of the Ottomans were another important dynasty, the Safavids, and their successors, the Qajars. Though originally from a Turkic tribe based in northwestern Iran, the Safavids differed from the Ottomans in several fundamental ways. To begin with, their reign never

extended far beyond the boundaries of modern-day Iran, and even in their territories they often had to rely on semiautonomous tribal chieftains (*uymaqs*) scattered throughout the interior of the country. Equally important were the different religious characters of the two dynasties and their respective sources of popular legitimacy. By definition, the Ottoman sultans saw themselves as the successors to the Rashidun and, as caliphs, the protectors of the Sunni *umma*. The Safavids, on the other hand, traced their genesis to religious mystics (Sufis) who were militantly Shi'ite.<sup>63</sup> In fact, under the Safavids Shi'ism became the state religion of Iran, and the royal court was modeled after that of ancient Persian kings (*shahs*) rather than anything resembling the Ottoman sultanate.

The Safavid conquest of Iran began with Ismail in 1500 (d. 1524). For the next ten years, he consolidated his rule over the country and launched a thorough and at times brutal campaign to convert the majority Sunni population to Shi'ism. The conversion campaign lasted for nearly a century and succeeded in creating a core of Shi'ite co-religionists—eventually up to 90 percent—in much of the central parts of the country. It is no accident that today Iran's Sunni minorities are concentrated among the country's non-Persian ethnic groups that are scattered along the country's borders: the Arabs along the southwestern border with Iraq; the Kurds along the western borders with Iraq and Turkey; the Turkmans along the northeastern border with Turkmenistan; and the Baluchis along the southeastern border with Pakistan. The Safavids belonged to the numerically more dominant Twelver (or Imami) branch of Shi'ism, which, as its name implies, believes in the sanctity of twelve imams (leaders of religious communities), the last of whom, the Mahdi, is in occultation and will return at the End of Time. The Safavids' own knowledge of Shi'ite theology and jurisprudence appears to have been scant, so the conversion process was reported to be quick and rather superficial, in some instances consisting merely of reciting a slogan.<sup>64</sup>

Within a few decades, during the reign of Shah Abbas (r. 1588–1629), the Safavids reached the zenith of their rule. Abbas moved the capital from the northwestern city of Tabriz to Esfahan, located in central Iran and a safe distance from the Ottomans. There he embarked on a concerted campaign to build a magnificent city with ornate palaces, mosques, a bazaar, and a grand central square.<sup>65</sup> For his own and his subjects' viewing pleasure, he also built a polo grounds and a carnival arena.<sup>66</sup> Shi'ite scholars were brought in from Syria, Iraq, and Arabia to help teach and

propagate the new religion, and great mosques and religious schools (*madrasahs*) were built in the major cities.

Despite the zeal and determination of the dynasty's founder, Ismail, and the splendor of the royal court and the capital under Shah Abbas, the Safavids were never quite able to consolidate their rule throughout much of the country. Soon they were to confront strong resistance from various nomadic tribes and from other local rulers. More importantly, they were challenged in their Shi'ite legitimacy and interpretation by an increasingly independent and vocal class of clerics.<sup>67</sup> Significantly weakened, by the late 1600s and early 1700s Safavid rule was being threatened nearly everywhere outside the capital city of Esfahan. According to the historian Ira Lapidus, "[T]he Safavid state remained a court regime in a fluid society in which power was widely dispersed among competing tribal forces. These forces would in the end overthrow the dynasty."<sup>68</sup> The end came in the 1720s. Esfahan was captured in 1722 by one of the *uyyamaqs*, the Ghalzai Afghans, who then overthrew the dynasty in 1726.

A period of competing, local dynasties followed, none quite capable of achieving meaningful territorial hegemony beyond its immediate areas of control. Nevertheless, one of these competing groups, the Qajars, was able to establish a precarious suzerainty over significant parts of Iran beginning in 1779, giving rise to a dynasty by the same name. Although their hold on power remained tenuous throughout, the Qajars did manage to last until 1925.

The dynasty was established by one of the Qajar tribal chieftains, Agha Muhammad Khan (d. 1797), whose depression is said to have been partly behind his choice as capital of an unremarkable small town named Tehran in 1785. Later Qajar kings—especially Fath Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834) and Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–96)—steadily nationalized the dynasty and neutralized many of the competing tribes and local rulers.<sup>69</sup> But neither they nor their successors could effectively counter the rising powers of the Shi'ite *ulama* or the commercial and territorial designs of the British and the Russians. Two disastrous wars with Russia, in 1804–5 and 1828, resulted in the loss of much of Iran's territory in the Caucasus to its northern neighbor. Not to be outdone, Britain encouraged British entrepreneurs to acquire monopoly export rights known as "concessions," and the Iranian government granted major concessions to British interests in 1863 (for telegraph lines), 1872 (for mining), and 1889 (for tobacco).<sup>70</sup> Both Britain and Russia also discovered loans—necessary to fund infrequent development projects or the far more costly royal visits to



Europe—as a guaranteed way of securing the dependence of the fledgling Qajar state on their respective governments. In 1900, for example, the Iranian government secured a loan of £2,000,000 from Russia so that Muzafar al-Din Shah (r. 1896–1907) and his entourage could go on an eight-month tour of Europe.<sup>71</sup> Before long, the combination of foreign dominance, institutional decay, and royal despotism sparked the Constitutional Revolution.

Iran's Constitutional Revolution is generally dated from 1905 to 1911. It involved three principal elements in Iranian society: the *ulama*, some of whom were procourt but many of whom favored limitations on the arbitrary powers of the monarch; the merchants, whose opposition was inspired by their organic links with the *ulama* and their resentment toward foreign concessions; and a small cadre of educated intellectuals, who were heartened by the success of the constitutionalists in Istanbul and the European phenomenon of limited, parliamentary monarchy. Also important were local notables (*'ayan*), many of whom were closely allied with, and were at times members of, the *ulama* or the merchant classes. Often divided and bitterly fractious, the emergence of revolutionary circumstances in the early 1900s brought these groups together, uniting them in the common purpose of a brewing revolutionary movement.<sup>72</sup> But their growing demands for a House of Justice (Edalat Khaneh) and eventually a parliament (Majles) were met by the recalcitrance of Muzafar al-Din Shah, who agreed to decree a constitution only on his deathbed. Even then, his successor, Muhammad Ali (r. 1907–9) tried to quell the Majles by bombarding it. When he was forced to abdicate, power passed to the twelve-year-old Ahmad Shah, but by then neither domestic control nor control of the country's borders was in government hands, the former being controlled by tribal chieftains and the latter by Britain and Russia.

The Constitutional Revolution had a mixed legacy for Iran. To begin with, it is unclear whether the participants in the movement to impose constitutional restrictions on the monarchy—the clergy, members of the intelligentsia, local notables, and bazaar merchants—ever considered themselves “revolutionaries” per se. They neither sought to nor were able to overthrow the existing political order and replace it with a fundamentally different one. Instead, insofar as the movement's principal actors were concerned, they had embarked on a quest to bring about a government that would be in compliance with traditional notions of justice (*'edalat*) and freedom from tyranny (*zulm*).<sup>73</sup> In the long run, they failed. In the process, the movement gave rise to a number of local associations (*anjomans*),

especially in Tehran and the northern city of Tabriz. Inspired by and modeled after the communist soviets, the associations were meant to choose local deputies for the Majles and to take an active role in local government. However, they had the unintended consequence of deepening existing factional divisions and greatly contributing to the country's administrative paralysis. And, as if to add insult to injury, the two great powers, Britain and Russia, only found Iran's chaotic circumstances more conducive to their larger imperial goals and expanded their presence and hold over the country.

Despite its multiple setbacks and negative consequences, the Constitutional Revolution turned out to be one of the most important events in Iranian history. Later generations of Iranians pointed to the "revolutionary" years of 1905–11 as the beginning of a long and protracted struggle to curtail the arbitrary powers of absolutist monarchy. Also, both the constitution (*Qanun Asasi*, or Basic Law) and the Majles were important political innovations for Iran, their foreign and imported nature notwithstanding. While in the early decades the Majles was politically emasculated and ceased to function as a meaningful parliamentary body, in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the Iranian monarchy was once again weakened, it did make its imprint on Iranian history. Finally, the same set of actors involved in the Constitutional Revolution went on to bring about a different sort of revolution some seven decades later—the Islamic revolution of 1978–79—this time with significant help from the urban middle classes.

In the short run, however, the Constitutional Revolution plunged Iran into chaos. With an ineffectual monarchy and the Majles torn by factional rivalries, the country drifted through the Great War at the mercy of foreign powers. Finally, in 1921, an army officer named Reza and a well-known journalist by the name of Seyyed Zia-alddin Tabatabai launched a military coup, becoming the commander of the army and the prime minister, respectively. Zia was eased out of power in 1923, and Reza deposed the monarchy two years later, thus bringing the Qajar era to an end. Having earlier adopted the last name Pahlavi, he declared himself shah and established the Pahlavi dynasty.

## CONCLUSION

Habitation patterns, geography, commerce, and prevailing sociocultural norms often directly influence the life of human communities. In relation to the Middle East, great civilizations rose along major riverbanks

and died out when they could no longer manage the canals and irrigation works around which their hydraulic states and societies had emerged. Related to this was the importance of cities and the resulting connection of their economic wealth and well-being with the structures and institutions of political power. Vast expanses of desert elsewhere led to the emergence of cities with significant population concentrations alongside remote, small villages and mobile nomadic tribes. Geographic distance, reinforced by a preponderance of mountainous and inaccessible desert areas, made centralized state building more arduous, often resulting in the extremes of either royal despotism or political dysfunction. In either case, political institutions became impermanent, often rising fast and falling hard, isolated from the larger social arena they sought to govern. Society, whether in Iran in the east or in Morocco in the west, went about its own life, largely impervious to the competition of tribes that aspired to become ruling dynasties. Territorial conquests and mass conversions did influence the daily lives of the masses, but the overall level of contact between the people, or their collectivity of "society," and the various apparatuses of political power, what we today call the "state," was minimal.

A survey of Middle Eastern political history highlights another important conclusion, the significance of Islam, from the very beginning, as both a moral order and a source of social organization and political mobilization. Repeated dynasties, the most notable and resilient of which were the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the Ottomans, and the Safavids, were inspired by the ideals and teachings of Islam and used their political power to spread it. A more cynical but equally valid interpretation would be to see Islam as a tool for political legitimation from the earliest times, manipulated, often mutilated, to suit specific political purposes. As the events of our own times demonstrate, the convenience of such use has not been lost on more recent generations of Middle Eastern politicians.

Finally, colonialism has a long history in the Middle East. The rhetoric of the Ottomans and what they stood for in real life, the caliphate, makes it easy to forget that their rule, especially outside their Anatolian heartland, was essentially colonial. The provinces were mostly considered backwaters, members of the *umma* good for the military protection of the Istanbul-based dynasty and the raising of revenues. Whatever economic development occurred there was not so much for the sake of the local population as for the greater good of the empire. Mosques were built, roads and waterworks repaired, and forts erected only insofar as

they served the purposes of the royal court in Istanbul. In fact, many previously prosperous regions and provinces were bled dry by tax farming. Compounding matters, many of the conservative *ulama* identified science and technology with Europe, the abode of Christianity and the crusading nemesis of Islam. Sacrificed in the process were industrial development and the emergence of local political institutions and practices. The ensuing problems of economic underdevelopment and skewed political institutionalization would only become magnified in the twentieth century.