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 will begin with a brief survey of that larger context. It will then trace 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 Achemenid 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.\(^1\) Jewish and pagan communities were also scattered throughout the area, including in the Arabian peninsula, where a majority worshipped local deities.\(^2\)

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.  

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, elaborate political and administrative apparatuses had been set up, and religious power and authority, as well as liturgy and customs, had evolved. 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. 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 6,000 B.C. and involved the development of agriculture and the domestication of new types of animals. The proportion of villages and nomadic tribes appears to have oscillated depending on political currents and the rise and fall of local dynasties. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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.16 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.17 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. 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.

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 become 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 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.20 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.21 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.22 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 Mec- cans (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.23 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.24 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.”

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. 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). 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.

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. 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.
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.31

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).32 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 disenchanted 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.33

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.34 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.35

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.36 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.37

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.