

Global Middle East

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Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu, Buddhist, sufi, or zen. Not any religion or cultural system.

I am not from the East or the West, not out of the ocean or up from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not composed of elements at all.

RUMI (1207–1273)

RARELY DO LOCALITIES, COUNTRIES, AND REGIONS develop over centuries and millennia in isolation; rather, they develop in complex interaction with others. The societies of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region also referred to as North Africa and West Asia (NAWA), are not an exception. Their economic, political, cultural, scientific, intellectual, and artistic formations have come about from a complex set of flows, innovations, interactions, and exchanges with those outside and within the region. Ever since the idea of “global” or “worldliness” has been part of people’s consciousness, the region has been immensely influenced by various global forces. It has also profoundly impacted developments in other parts of the world, including what is generally called the “West.”

Yet the Middle East has long been viewed from an “exceptionalist” lens in much of the Western press, cinema, television, literature, and scholarship. This exceptionalism depicts peoples and societies as being resilient to change, entrapped by their own history, culture, and religion, and prone to tribalism and nativism. In such a view, culture and religion rarely change, and contemporary conflicts are often attributed to stubborn religious and sectarian rivalries dating back centuries, if not millennia. News media, for instance, are replete with explanations of the Middle East as a region of continuous war, sectarian bloodshed, the cradle of extremism, oppression of women, and religious conflicts, as if these are the result of an innate, inward-looking, and change-resistant culture. Only rarely do analysts take into consideration

how the role of geopolitics, multinational entanglements, arms sales (which are among the highest in the world), military interventions, climate change, technological advances, social media networks, high rates of internal and external migrations (the list goes on) influence, transform, and alter societies, from all directions.

For a short period during the Arab Uprisings of late 2010 through 2013, a break to the mainstream narrative occurred. Media from much of North America and Europe celebrated the protestors as global models of pro-democracy, nonviolent warriors from progressive youth movements.¹ However, the so-called Arab Spring soon turned into what countless analysts prosaically dubbed the “Arab Winter,” and a return to the old paradigms of regional stagnation and sectarianism ensued. This resorting to stereotypes to understand the region while sidelining crucial developments in geopolitics, markets, technology, social policies, climate change, grassroots movements, and other dynamics is partially rooted in what Edward Said famously termed “Orientalism.” This refers to a systematic body of knowledge production that constructs a totalizing image of the Middle East as an object of prejudice. It considers Muslim-majority populations as static, while neglecting differentiation and change brought about by exchanges among various societies and peoples in the region.

Today a powerful neo-Orientalist approach depicts the region as largely homogenous, closed, parochial, and resistant to change. Imagined in this fashion, the Middle East has little of value to offer to the world and is responsible for its own troubles. This binary of the (Middle) East versus the West has come to occupy a central place in the well-known “clash of civilizations” theory advanced by political scientist Samuel Huntington in 1993. Huntington viewed an essential opposition between the Western and Islamic civilizations. The idea of this clash has considerably shaped perceptions in the United States about Islam and the Muslim-majority Middle East, in the media and foreign policy circles as well as among different publics.² Even the very term the “Middle East” is a colonial construct coined in the 1850s by the British India Office, popularized in the late 1930s in the British outpost in Egypt (Egypt was the “middle” point between Britain and India, the “East”). The term traveled to the United States in 1946 with the establishment of the Middle East Institute in the nation’s capital. The Middle East thus became a specific object of policy and research.

Few would deny that in past decades countries in the region have suffered from debilitating wars, stifling political repression, new forms of patriarchy,

growing inequality, and more entrenched religious extremism and radicalism. But are these features rooted in local culture and an outgrowth of long-held traditions? Take, for instance, Islamic radicalism, jihadi terrorism, or the phenomenon of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). If these were inherent landscapes of local cultures and traditions, why did they emerge largely after the 1970s and seldom appeared before that time? How do we explain the fact that only “very few radicals have a past of long-standing piety, and most of them are religiously illiterate,” as Olivier Roy suggests (chapter 21) in this book?

The truth is that jihadi terrorism did not naturally arise from certain values intrinsic to local culture. Rather, it was imported and spread by thousands of youths from diverse national, class, and educational backgrounds who joined the Mujahedin in Afghanistan during the Cold War. The Mujahedin, with the support of the United States, worked to expel the Soviet invaders. At the time, al-Qaeda was under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden, the son of a construction magnate with close ties to the Saudi royal family, who advanced the cause of global terrorism in the name of Islam. He turned on his former US ally and is widely reputed to have masterminded the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. As Roy argues, violent radicalism of militant Islamists or jihadi terrorists has little in essence to do with the idea of “jihad” as understood in the legal Islamic tradition. As such, Roy writes, “Jihad was traditionally defined as a collective duty to defend a part of the Muslim territory under attack.” No individual could call for jihad or bestow on himself the quality of being a “jihadi.” Instead, militant Islamists deployed the language of jihad to *Islamize* an emerging radicalism that was embedded in youth nihilism and fascination with death—a narrative in which successive movements embodied in ISIS and other global jihadi groups found a perfect fit.

Another example can be found in the ongoing conflict between Palestinians and successive Israeli governments. Although some analysts try to shape the narrative by claiming Israel’s “biblical right” to the land of Palestine, or reduce the conflict to “age-old” hostilities between Islam and Judaism, the conflict is in fact rooted in far more recent history, particularly since World War I. This history includes British support for the establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people” with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, European anti-Semitism that culminated in the horrors of the Holocaust, the development of strong strategic alliances between the United States and Israel, and the capitulation of certain authoritarian Arab states to the status quo. More recently, Evangelical Christians in the

United States have been pointing to end-time prophecies in their support of the modern state of Israel. As conflicts escalate in Israel and the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip around Palestinian rights, security, and sovereignty, Evangelical Christians have been propounding Israel's "biblical right" to Palestine.³

According to a 2013 Pew Research Center poll, American Evangelicals are even stronger supporters of Israel than are American Jews. If jihadi radicals are in effect *Islamizing* terrorism by deploying the language of jihad, Zionist radicals are *Christianizing* the occupation of Palestinian lands by deploying a language of "biblical rights." Ilana Feldman's chapter in this book (chapter 22) offers a much needed context to understand the transnational connections and solidarity networks involved in this conflict, with a myriad of players and interests.

Each chapter in this edited volume is a testimony to the global interlinkages of the Middle East in the political, economic, cultural, intellectual, and artistic domains. The authors narrate how these domains have been shaped by interconnections to transnational forces, peoples, and geographies. But this globality has been complex, taking different expressions and involving different layers, scales, and directions. Sometimes it is expressed in how certain events or interests from outside *affect* a particular society; other times it is manifested in how persons, products, or cultural registers *circulate*, travel through national boundaries to be taken on and shared by others. Interlinkages are displayed in the way societies trade, give, take, and *exchange* cultural and material goods—a process that tends to advance those goods; in other instances, they are revealed in the way persons, ideas, or emotions express belonging to not one but many geographies, taking the *world as home*.

GEOPOLITICAL EFFECTS

Although we do not hold the Orientalist view of cultural exceptionalism, there does exist a kind of "geopolitical exceptionalism" in the region, forged by the trilogy of geography, oil, and Israel—elements that have historically heightened imperial dominance and intraregional rivalry. In the aftermath of World War I, Ottoman provinces were carved into zones of British and French influence in the infamous Sykes-Picot/Asia Minor Agreement of 1916. These artificial borders divided peoples and historic communities, splitting contiguous groups like the Kurds and Druze. In the postcolonial period

of the 1950s through the 1970s, the forced creation of distinct nation-states planted the seeds of territorial claims and conflicts, instigating wars between neighboring countries.

Thirst for raw materials and control over trade routes brought the lives of the colonized people into global circuits of trade and transportation, production and profit. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, 80 percent to 90 percent of Egyptian exports, mainly cotton, went to British and European textile mills, not only because the American Civil War (1861–65) cut down the US cotton production in the world market, but especially because British colonists wanted Egypt to export its raw material rather than produce its own textiles. Today, even though it is theoretically free from colonial control, Egyptian cotton is entangled in a global network that connects a cotton grower in the Nile Delta to a seaport in Alexandria, a cotton exchange in Liverpool, a factory in Lancashire, a retailer in America, and courtrooms in various major capitals of the world.

To add salt to the wound, the highly desirable commodity of Egyptian cotton used to make sheets and shirts may not even originate in Egypt because, as Ahmed Shokr discusses (chapter 15), the label “Egyptian cotton” in legal and commercial parlance is not a national marker but a quality brand. Beyond the global circuits of politics, trade, and markets, the fortune of Egyptian cotton also depends on a critical and strategic natural resource—water. With 80 percent spent on agriculture, water remains vulnerable to climate change, energy crisis, local politics and management, as well as regional geopolitics. A number of countries in the MENA region—Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Sudan, and Syria to name but a few—already suffer from inadequate water and energy, and in some areas the situation is dire. As Jeannie Sowers relates (chapter 13), key human factors contributing to drought and other forms of environmental degradation include wars, civil strife, occupation, and mismanagement. Egypt shares the river Nile with Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda, and conflict between these countries can very quickly trigger crisis in the supply of water, energy, and agricultural products—elements that are so deeply interconnected.

The discovery of oil in the Arabian Peninsula transformed geopolitics and transnational trade, triggering massive transregional migration flows as well as economic and social developments. Since the 1970s, Iran and the Gulf Arab countries gained immense revenues from oil and in turn experienced remarkable economic growth, the rise of a middle class, infrastructural development, social changes, and quests for democracy.⁴ At the same time, oil

enabled autocratic and authoritarian governments to rule as “rentier states.” They dispensed welfare to their citizens and attempted to appease and essentially buy off dissenting groups. More significantly, as oil became an energy source driving global economic growth, foreign powers and their corporations (initially from Britain, the United States, France, and the Netherlands, with Russia and China later gaining dominance in this lucrative market) established influence in the region and supported autocratic regimes in exchange for direct access to oil and economic and political favors.

As Timothy Mitchell shows (chapter 14), the largest oil-importing countries encouraged massive arms sales to recycle the money they would pay for importing oil. For instance, in 1953, after the popular prime minister of Iran, Mohamed Mossadegh, nationalized Iranian oil, the United States and Britain organized a coup to topple his secular democratic government in favor of the pro-US monarch Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who became the biggest buyer of US arms in the region. The Shah was later overthrown by the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The support of repressive rulers of oil-rich countries is an old story and continues to present times. In 2019, for example, even after the US Senate passed a resolution in March to end US support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (only to be vetoed by President Donald Trump in April of the same year), after the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) concluded in a November 2018 report that the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Ben Salman (MBS), had ordered the killing and dismemberment of Saudi journalist and US resident Jamal Khashoggi, and despite numerous reports of staggering repression of dissent and violation of human rights of women, young activists, artists, and other members of the royal family, Trump continued to wholeheartedly support and defend MBS and continue unabated with trade and arms deals to the country.

In other words, the absence of democratic rule in the region is not simply an outcome of religion or age-old traditions or cultural practices. After all, the Arab uprisings meant to bring more accountable and democratic governance in the Arab world. Rather, this absence is largely linked to the region’s political economy and powerful enablers of repression and autocracy. People in the region have responded to these challenges partly by deploying the language of “human rights” adopted from United Nations (UN) charters, conventions, and international NGOs. The 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a document born out of the devastation of World War II, was an attempt to lay out a set of international principles for the pro-

tection of all peoples. Prominent rights advocates from the region, including Charles Malik (Lebanese) and Bedia Afnan (Iraqi), were influential members of the UN Human Rights Commission. Yet as Lori Allen illustrates (chapter 23), “human rights” have been torn between the imperial desire to use them as a tool of geopolitical dominance (e.g., invading foreign countries in the name of “bringing democracy,” “enforcing human rights,” and “protecting women and children”) and the indigenous urge to invoke rights as an empowering language for social struggle. Although the process of imperializing human rights has rendered some people in the region to suspect the concept, others have sought to “define the meaning and substance of rights in ways that make sense to them, and in which they try to defend them on their own terms.” In sum, geopolitics, while a critical force in the region, is not destiny. People and movements transcend regional particularities to act as players in refiguring the global order.

CIRCULATING BELIEFS, ARTS, AND FOODS

If global forces and processes—such as colonialism, oil markets, or arms sales—have deeply influenced the politics and economies of individual countries in the Middle East, ideas and cultural products from the region have equally shaped the social and cultural landscapes outside the region. The remarkable global circulation of belief systems, technologies, music, and foods that originated in the Middle East profoundly transformed the course of human history. The very idea of monotheism as a state religion likely originated in ancient Egypt during the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaten (1353–1336 BCE). The idea of a single universal deity has been the cornerstone of the three main Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all of which were born in what we now refer to as the Middle East. It is remarkable to note that in the twenty-first century, more than half the world’s population adheres to an Abrahamic religion, a topic pondered by Ebrahim Moosa (chapter 2). Moosa shows how the idea of prophecy in these monotheistic religions underlined the impulse to create a worldly political order in which God occupied a central place, beginning with the notion of “heavenly king” and continuing with today’s religious fundamentalisms. The monotheistic God has had enormous global staying power and remains as strong a phenomenon as ever despite relentless challenges from science and secular sensibilities.

As notions of prophecy and worship traveled with merchant ships, pilgrim caravans, and migrants, so too did food and recipes. Today we take for granted certain food or drinks but have little knowledge of their origins. Sami Zubaida (chapter 9) lays out the historical circulation and art of food. As empires spread, so too did their quest for culinary distinction. During the Muslim expansions, food items brought mostly from India and China—such as rice, hard wheat, sugarcane, citrus fruit, spinach, and aubergine—traveled to Europe, the Iberian Peninsula, and Sicily. Today, European names for “rice” come from the Arabic *arruz*, “sugar” from *sukkar*, “aubergine” from Arabic and Persian *badinjan*, “alcohol” from the Arabic *al-kubl* (antimony eyeliner), “lime” or “lemon” from *limu*, and “orange” from *narinji*. The diffusion of small dishes or appetizers known collectively as “mezze” (originally a Persian word) into global diets has transformed the traditional European meal pattern from full course meal into largely shared “small plates.” Nowadays, in what Zubaida calls a global “foodie milieu” in the Western foodscape, such Middle Eastern foods as kebab, hummus, falafel, baklava, or mezze have entered common food vocabularies.

Like food, music holds an extraordinary capacity to spread and merge cultures. With an intangible nature, semantic ambiguity, and no impassible social boundaries, music remains a most “globalizable expressive substance,” as Michael Frishkopf recounts (chapter 11). Musical instruments and sounds of the region traversed Europe, the United States, and Latin America through such channels as West African Islam, the slave trade, colonial encounters, and immigration. Even though certain genres from traditional music and dance became tropes in fanciful Orientalist stereotypes (like a sonic background to belly dancing mixed with exotic femininity), musical repertoires and movements from the Middle East circulated widely. They have been adapted and incorporated into local musical genres, from hip-hop to Hollywood soundtracks. Without a doubt, the “impact of the Middle East over nearly eight centuries” in music, poetry, dance, sounds has been enduring.

Hollywood and Bollywood may dominate global commercial cinema, but Middle East cinema has carved an important niche. Egyptian films and especially television serials have enjoyed large audiences throughout the Arab world, as have Turkish shows popular among Arabs and West Africans. The avant-garde and highly acclaimed Iranian cinema has gained worldwide audiences. While US and UK film cultures have informed broad frames