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The goal of this text is to introduce students to the contemporary comparative politics of the Middle East. Interestingly, what the Middle East is turns out to be a complex question. The name *Middle East* was not attached to the area by its residents themselves. Rather, beginning in the nineteenth century, political elites in Europe and the United States coined the terms *Near East* and *Middle East* to refer to (various delineations of) territories that lay between Western Europe and the *Far East* (China, Japan, etc.). Because the term *Middle East* was bestowed on the region by outside powers according to their own particular political, strategic, and geographic perspectives, it has been criticized as West- or Euro-centric. Still, it is in wide use today and typically refers to the geographic region bounded to the north by Turkey, to the east by Iran, to the west by Egypt, and to the south by the Arabian Peninsula (see Figure 1.1). In addition to Egypt, Turkey, and Iran, the Middle East thus includes Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

The material in this book also encompasses North Africa, referring to the northernmost tier of African countries that border the Mediterranean Sea: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Definitions of *North Africa* vary somewhat; for instance, the United Nations (UN) includes Sudan and the Western Sahara (a disputed territory controlled primarily by Morocco) in its definition of *Northern Africa*. Others sometimes include Mauritania within North Africa. We delimit North Africa as we do primarily because these four countries share a great deal in common with the political dynamics of the countries of the Middle East—and this is much less so the case with Sudan, the Western Sahara, and Mauritania. *MENA* is a commonly used
Figure 1.1 The Middle East and North Africa
acronym referring to the Middle East and North Africa thus delineated, and readers will encounter it in this text. For simplicity’s sake, in this book the term Middle East refers to the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (those highlighted in Figure 1.1).

What does it mean, then, to study the comparative politics of the contemporary Middle East? Scholars of comparative politics study the internal political dynamics of countries (rather than relations between or among countries, which is international politics). So, for example, instead of exploring when and why countries in the region go to war with one another, we will explore how Middle Eastern governments are structured, who opposes those governments and why, how the opposition works to bring about change, and so forth. Some comparativists tackle this task by deeply mastering the internal politics of one country. Others study a country’s domestic politics while also comparing and contrasting what they find with what is happening elsewhere in the region. Are trends the same everywhere, or do differences exist depending on context? For instance, does economic crisis motivate all dictators to extend more freedoms to their people? Or do only certain dictators choose that path, while others manage crises via alternative methods? We can learn about broader political science processes by studying a collection of countries’ politics individually as well as in relation to one another. This text allows the reader to do both.

An Overview of States in the Region Today

The Middle East encompasses twenty countries that are home to approximately 320 million people. Most of them are Arab, meaning that their citizens speak the Arabic language and perceive that they have a shared historical, cultural, and social experience as Arabs. Three of the twenty countries are not Arab, however. The national language of Israel is Hebrew, and while many Israelis speak Arabic, the historical, cultural, and social bond for the majority of Israelis emerges from their identity as Jews. Turkey and Iran also are not Arab countries. Turks are a different ethnic group and speak Turkish, a language that linguistically is unrelated to Arabic. The dominant language in Iran is Farsi, which—although written in Arabic script—also is unrelated to Arabic.

Many unwittingly think that the “Middle East” and the “Muslim world” are one and the same. Certainly, the vast majority of people living in all Middle East countries save Israel are Muslim. At the same time, religious minorities—especially Jews and Christians—are to be found in most of them. For example, Christians of a variety of denominations (Maronite Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and others) make up perhaps as much as 40 percent of the Lebanese population. Nearly 10 percent of Egyptians are Coptic
Christians, and approximately 6 percent of Jordanians are Christian, most of them Greek Orthodox. Meanwhile, the Muslim world extends well beyond the Middle East. Muslim-majority countries are found in sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and South and Southeast Asia. So the Middle East is just a small slice of the Muslim world in terms of both geography and population. Indeed, a majority of the world’s Muslims live outside of the Middle East.

Table 1.1 provides basic statistical information about the countries of the Middle East. In terms of sheer size, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Iran are the largest Middle East countries; Bahrain and the Palestinian Authority, by contrast, occupy tiny pieces of territory. In terms of population, Egypt, Turkey, and Iran are the region’s powerhouses, with populations upward of 70 million, while tiny Bahrain has a population of less than 1 million. More than 90 percent of Israelis, Kuwaitis, and Qataris live in urban areas, compared to only 31 percent of Yemenis and only 43 percent of Egyptians. Populations are growing most rapidly in the Palestinian Authority and Yemen, where the average number of births per woman is five and six respectively; by contrast, ten Middle East countries have fertility rates of just two births per woman. What about wealth? On a per capita basis, the economies of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Israel produce the most. Yemen is the region’s poorest country measured in terms of economic output, followed by the Palestinian Authority and Iraq. Finally, the proportion of adult females who are literate ranges from just 40 percent in Yemen, to around 65 percent in Algeria and Iraq, to 93 percent in Kuwait. Clearly, then, there is considerable variation in the region when it comes to land, population, and indicators of development.

One of the main things the discipline of comparative politics studies is the type of governmental system a country has. Often referred to as a regime, a governmental system refers not to the particular group of individuals filling key offices at a given point in time—this is simply a government—but rather more broadly to the processes by which leaders are selected (election? dynastic succession? military coup?) and how those leaders in turn exercise power (in consultation with others according to a rule of law? individually and arbitrarily? somewhere in between?). Systems of government in the Middle East are almost without exception authoritarian. Indeed, one of the ways in which the region has stood out globally in the past generation is that, while other areas of the world have seen dictatorships fall and democracies erected in their stead, Middle East dictatorships have stood firm and persisted.

What, generally, does “authoritarian” rule indicate? Leaders are not selected through free and fair elections, and a relatively narrow group of people control the state apparatus and are not held accountable for their decisions by the broader public. Although there is variation from case to case, political rights and civil liberties are generally quite limited. Political
### Table 1.1  Statistical Snapshot of Middle East Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Land Area (km²)</th>
<th>Total Population 2008</th>
<th>Urban Population (percentage of total) 2008</th>
<th>Fertility Rate, Total (births per woman) 2007</th>
<th>GDP per Capita (constant US$ 2000) 2005</th>
<th>Literacy Rate, Adult Female (percentage of females ages 15 and above) 2005–2007</th>
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<td>Libya</td>
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<td>78</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6,828</td>
<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
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<td>56</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,566</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
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<td>72</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9,530</td>
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<td>Palestinian Authority</td>
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<td>96</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29,454</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>1,242</td>
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<td>Tunisia</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2,407</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>769,630</td>
<td>73,914,260</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4,691</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>83,600</td>
<td>4,484,199</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23,837</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>527,970</td>
<td>23,053,462</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, various years (Washington, DC).

*Notes:* a. Data for Iraq are from 1999 for total population, urban population, and GDP per capita, and from 2000 for adult female literacy rate.

n.a. indicates data are not available.

Rights refer to characteristics such as free and fair elections for the chief executive and the legislature; the ability of citizens to organize in multiple political parties and compete in elections free from interference by the military, religious, or other powerful groups; the absence of discrimination against cultural, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups; and transparent, accountable, noncorrupt government. Civil liberties refer to freedom of expression and belief, freedom of association and organization, the rule of
law, and individual rights. Table 1.2 lists the rankings given to Middle East countries for political rights and civil liberties in 2008 by Freedom House, a prominent nongovernmental organization (NGO) that gauges such rights globally.

While most Middle Eastern regimes are authoritarian, they are not homogeneously so. That is, dictatorship takes more than one form in the area. The two main variants are monarchies and republics. The monarchies are led by kings whose reigns are not conferred by elections; instead, when incumbents die or become incapacitated, leadership is passed down hereditarily through ruling families. In monarchies, power rests in and emanates from the ruling family and those elites who are allied to it. The region’s monarchies are Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Morocco, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, and Oman. The region’s authoritarian republics are led by presidents, whose terms in power are conferred by elections. Elections are not free or fair, but they are held, usually at regular intervals, both for the chief executive position and for national parliaments. In these republics, political

Table 1.2 Political and Civil Rights in the Middle East
According to Freedom House, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Political Rights</th>
<th>Civil Liberties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinian Authority</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Scale 1–7, with 1 denoting “most free” and 7 denoting “least free.”
power typically emanates from preponderant political parties that are headed by the president, are backed by the military, and have access to large amounts of state revenues. Syria, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, and Yemen are the Middle East’s authoritarian republics.

There are exceptions to authoritarian rule in the Middle East, however. The region also comprises a number of countries with political systems wherein outsiders or opposition parties can successfully oust incumbent chief executives—something that is not possible in the monarchies and republics. Israel boasts free, fair, competitive, multiparty elections for seats in its parliament, the Knesset; over the course of its sixty-year existence, the prime ministerial position has changed hands regularly, alternating between the two or three main political parties. In Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, and Iraq as well, competitive elections determine the composition of parliaments and cabinets, which then set law and policy in those countries. As will be noticed in Table 1.2, the Freedom House scores for Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, and Iraq are well below that of Israel, a fact attributable to the existence of a host of limitations on political and civil liberties in those political communities. However, on the basic matter of whether or not incumbent executives are able to be removed and replaced through elections, these countries can be considered democratic.

Turkey and Iran can be considered “semidemocratic” on this dimension. Since 1950, free, fair, competitive, multiparty elections have determined which parties sit in the Turkish parliament and make up the cabinet; the prime ministerial position has rotated among several political parties on the left and the right of the political spectrum. The Turkish military, however, has executed a series of coups in the past and today retains the constitutional right to interfere in civilian governance in ways that are inconsistent with democratic practice. In Iran, citizens go to the polls regularly to elect a president and parliament. The presidency has rotated across the major political camps in Iran in the past generation. However, an institution called the Council of Guardians sits atop these elected bodies and controls their membership through its power to vet all would-be candidates for office and disallow candidates it feels are not loyal to the Islamist constitutional foundations of the Iranian republic.

This overview is just an introductory taste of contemporary political dynamics in the region. The chapters that follow go into much more detail, both by theme—government-opposition relations, the impact of international politics, economics, civil society, religion, identity, and gender—and by country. The remainder of this chapter provides essential historical knowledge regarding how the map of the Middle East came to be and what crucial historical legacies bear on Middle East politics and society today.
Essential Historical Background

Islamization and Arabization

How did the Middle East come to be predominantly Muslim in terms of faith and predominantly Arab in terms of language and ethnicity? The establishment and spread of Islam began in the seventh century C.E., and it was this process that also Arabized large portions of the region. Prior to the rise of Islam, two empires dominated the Middle East. The Sasanids ruled Iraq and Iran, while the Byzantines ruled the Anatolian Peninsula (modern Turkey), northern Syria, and parts of North Africa, Egypt, and those territories that lie immediately east of the Mediterranean Sea (modern-day Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine). In 610 C.E., a young caravan trader named Muhammad began receiving revelations. He would become the Prophet of Islam, a new faith that was born in Mecca and Medina (cities in what is today Saudi Arabia).

Islam was strictly monotheistic, which stood in contrast to the pagan beliefs of the majority of the tribes who inhabited the Arabian Peninsula at that time. It exhorted those tribes—which often were at war with one another—to see themselves as brothers instead, and to submit to the one true god, Allah. Islam also preached the importance of justice and of caring for the weak in society (the poor, the sick, orphans, and the like). Although Muhammad encountered considerable initial resistance from those to whom his prophecy represented a threat, by the end of his lifetime he had built a considerable new Muslim community, earning—through genuine conversion, diplomacy, and force—the loyalty of most tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. Upon the Prophet Muhammad’s death, the realm of Islam exploded geographically. Arabian tribesmen, with zeal inspired both by their conversion to a new faith and by the prospect of new power and wealth, carried the banner of Islam northward out of the Arabian Peninsula into the “Fertile Crescent” (today’s Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority), then eastward to Iran and westward across North Africa and even into Spain. These expansions destroyed part of the Byzantine and all of the Sasanid empires and paved the way for the creation of two successive Islamic empires: the Umayyad Empire (661–750), with its capital at Damascus, and the Abbasid Empire (750–945), with its capital at Baghdad.

Prior to Islam’s emergence, Arabic-speaking tribes lived primarily in the Arabian Peninsula. With the Arab-Muslim conquests into the broader Middle East and subsequent building of empires, however, the pace of Arab peoples moving into the region picked up. Arabic, the language of the conquering empires, became the language of written communication with regard to administrative, religious, and cultural affairs. Non-Arabs gradually adopted
the tongue as a result. Over an even longer period of time than Arabization consumed, a majority of people in the lands conquered by Muslim armies became converts to the new faith. These were not forced conversions, however. These Islamic empires allowed Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians to practice their religions unimpeded as long as they paid special taxes. Conversions occurred slowly over time, out of political expediency (to be of the same faith as the ruling elite had its rewards), due to commercial interest (Islamic law and networks facilitated trade), as well as out of a sense of shared cultural and social experience that was acquired over time.

**The Ottoman Empire**

The last great Islamic empire was the Ottoman Empire, founded by Turkic tribes (thus Turkish- rather than Arabic-speaking) beginning in the thirteenth century and centered on the imperial capital Istanbul. At their peak in the mid-sixteenth century C.E., the Ottomans controlled a breathtaking swath of territory, extending from deep into southeastern Europe, eastward to the Iranian border, southward through the Levant and parts of the Arabian Peninsula, and across North Africa to the Moroccan border. The Ottoman leader, or sultan, controlled a professional army and sat atop a substantial bureaucracy that administrated imperial affairs. He was also the caliph of the Islamic umma (community or nation) and used Islam to legitimate his rule. Sharia (Islamic law) constituted a core element of Ottoman law, and the ulama (clerics) staffed the empire’s court and educational systems. Yet while the Ottomans were an Islamic empire, other religious communities were allowed considerable leeway in terms of freedom of worship and control over local community affairs such as education and social services.

For the purposes of modern politics, two things are crucial to understand about the Ottoman Empire. First, it represented the last era in world history when the Middle East constituted a politically, economically, and militarily more powerful entity than “the West” (meaning, for that time period, Europe and Russia). During the 1500s the Ottomans challenged Venice, Italy, and Spain for supremacy in the Mediterranean. The Ottoman Empire also laid siege to the Habsburg capital of Vienna twice—once in 1529 and again in 1683. While it was victorious neither time, it did implant a pronounced sense of threat among Europeans.

The second critical point is that the tables began to turn in the seventeenth century as European states became increasingly powerful while the Ottoman Empire weakened. European powers successfully challenged the Ottomans for control over lucrative trade routes and penetrated the Ottoman Empire with European-controlled operations that imported European products and exported raw materials. These developments harmed the Ottomans economically, reducing revenues accruing to Ottoman coffers. Politically,
modern nation-states emerged in Europe, as did nationalism, defined by James Gelvin as the “belief that because a given population shares (or can be made to share) certain identifiable characteristics—religion, language, shared history, and so on—it merits an independent existence” (2008: 56). Nationalism became a powerful ideology that undermined the multiethnic Ottoman Empire by inspiring many of its subject peoples to attempt to secede. Finally, by the turn of the nineteenth century, European armies had become more professional and deadly, utilizing new technologies, tactics, and organizational strategies. Meanwhile, internal to the empire, the quality of sultans was declining and the central government was weakening relative to provincial power-holders. Military morale and discipline too were waning, in part because the inflation that struck Eurasia at this time devalued troops’ pay.

Ottoman elites were painfully aware of this turn of events. In the late 1600s the Ottomans lost territories to Russia, the Habsburgs, Venice, and Poland. Indeed, in 1656 the Venetians destroyed the Ottoman naval fleet. In the late 1700s the Russians repeatedly and successfully advanced on the Ottomans. The Ottomans were now following the Europeans in terms of culture as well. They imported architectural and painting styles, furniture—even tulips. By the 1800s, encouraged by Russia and other European powers, nationalist movements had arisen in Serbia, Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria, and these successfully seceded from the Ottoman Empire.

Ottoman elites were alarmed, of course, and as early as the 1600s began to wonder if and how they could reform the empire in order to better compete with their European rivals. As the Ottoman community engaged in deep intellectual debates, one camp concluded that if the Ottomans were to become a match for the Europeans, they would need to adopt European innovations and institutions such as military technology and training and tactics, and political institutions like parliaments. A second camp reached a quite different diagnosis of the problem, however, concluding that Ottoman weakness was a reflection of declining faith. The answer, then, was a return to a reinvigorated and purified Islam, not the mimicking of European ways.

The former camp won out, for a time anyway. During the late eighteenth century and through much of the nineteenth, Ottoman sultans attempted to radically restructure the empire’s operations to defend against expected further European encroachment. They changed how their subjects were taxed, both to increase loyalty and to increase revenues flowing to the empire’s coffers. They created an Ottoman parliament, modeled after the British and French institutions—in the hope that more inclusive, consultative governance would make for improved subject loyalty and better policy. They brought in European advisers to train new army units in modern warfare techniques, and they overhauled their educational, legal, and bureaucratic systems.
Ultimately it would be too little, too late. The reforms implemented during the nineteenth century faced significant internal resistance and thus their effectiveness was limited. Also, the Ottomans could not stem the tide of nationalism and the desire of many Ottoman subject peoples to have their own state. In 1918 when World War I ended, the Ottomans were on the losing side and would soon be extinguished as an empire.

**European Imperialism in the Middle East**

The Ottomans’ painful experience of decline vis-à-vis an increasingly powerful set of European countries was only the first of a series of conflicts between the Middle East and Europe. The second was an era of direct rule by various European countries over territories in the Middle East. Specifically, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing through the end of World War I, Britain, France, and Italy took control of the vast majority of the region. Table 1.3 illustrates which European power controlled what Middle East territory (identified by contemporary country names). Sometimes geostrategic affairs motivated the colonizers. Britain’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>European Power</th>
<th>Type of Authority</th>
<th>Years</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Yemen, North</td>
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*Note: n/a indicates not applicable; territory was never controlled by a European power.*
footprint in the Middle East turned on two main concerns: securing access to regional oil supplies and protecting key access routes to India, the “jewel” of the British Crown. Depending on the case, France generally was motivated by its relations with Christian communities and by commercial interests. Intra-European rivalry and the prestige that was attached to overseas colonies also motivated both powers.

The degree to which European powers took over the reins of politics in their respective Middle East holdings varied substantially. In part this depended on the “type” of intervention. Generally, holdings acquired prior to World War I were colonies, territories that European powers conquered unapologetically and exploited for their own purposes in the context of global great-power competition. Those holdings acquired after World War I, however, were awarded by the League of Nations under the “mandate system” in the context of new, more restrictive international norms regarding European control over distant lands. In places where they acted as mandatory powers, Europeans ostensibly had an obligation to protect natives’ welfare and prepare them for independence. In the Persian Gulf, British imperialism took the form of a series of treaty relationships negotiated with the ruling families of the small states that lined the coast.

In what ways did European power impact the region during this era? On one end of the spectrum, in Kuwait and the UAE, for example, Britain controlled foreign policy and port operations while leaving domestic political arrangements in those countries largely alone. In Morocco, the French took over domestic affairs—but did so by penetrating and harnessing existing indigenous institutions (like the monarchy), leaving them intact. By contrast, in Algeria, France uprooted and resettled tribes, destroyed domestic religious institutions, confiscated land, settled more than 150,000 Europeans, and ultimately annexed the entire country (as three separate French provinces). Perhaps even more dramatically, at World War I’s end, France and Britain literally drew the modern-day boundaries of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Israel/Palestinian Authority; engineered their respective political systems; and—in Iraq and Jordan—selected which kings would be placed on their respective thrones.

European rule had dramatic socioeconomic impacts as well. France and Britain used their colonies as export markets for cheap European manufactured goods that competed with locally made products, hurting domestic artisan and craftsman classes. European powers also relied on their imperial holdings as a source of raw materials (cotton, wheat, etc.). These dynamics integrated the Middle East into global markets in a dependent manner as exporters of agricultural or primary (raw material) products, a fact that was an obstacle to future development and prosperity. While European control shaped Middle East states’ economic trajectories in key ways, the European powers’ disposition toward their Middle East subjects was one of superiori-
ty and contempt. France and Britain legitimized their foreign holdings in part with the idea that they had a “civilizing” mission in the region. In particular, they looked down on Islam and facilitated the entrance of Christian missionaries into Middle East societies. Another key impact of the colonial period was a domestic divide that emerged in Middle Eastern countries between urban elites who were exposed to and often adopted the ideas and culture of the French and the British, on the one hand, and the rural masses who remained more oriented toward Arab-Islamic culture, on the other.

Several countries in the region escaped the yoke of direct European rule. Turkey was the successor state to the Ottoman Empire in its core Anatolian Peninsula territory. While European powers had clear designs on that land in the wake of World War I, an Ottoman army officer named Mustafa Kemal organized Turks into a national movement and fought an independence war to establish the borders of what today is Turkey. In Iran, the Qajar dynasty ruled from the late 1700s through the early twentieth century, when power shifted into the hands of Reza Khan and subsequently to his son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Saudi Arabia is the product of the statebuilding efforts of the Al Saud tribe, which beginning in the early 1700s sought to expand and consolidate its power in the Arabian Peninsula. The campaign had its ups and downs, but by 1932, Saudi Arabia was a nation-state and it has been independent ever since. Prior to its unification in 1990, Yemen had existed as two separate countries for over a century and a half: Britain ruled South Yemen as a colony, while North Yemen escaped European control. The Gulf state of Oman did as well.

Creation of the State of Israel

If Europe was the source of imperialist policies that left a strong imprint on the borders, politics, economics, and cultures of the Middle East, so too does the modern story of the emergence of Israel begin in Europe. In the late nineteenth century, in the face of various forms of discrimination against Jews—the worst being violent pogroms against Jewish communities in Russia and Eastern Europe—a man named Theodor Herzl began to advance the Zionist case that Jews constituted a nation, one that needed its own nation-state in order to ensure that Jews could live in security and dignity in a land where they constituted a majority. He and like-minded Jewish leaders then worked to make this vision a reality. They built institutions to raise awareness about and funds for the project, and they also sought the diplomatic support they knew would be crucial if they were to somehow obtain their own state. Zionist diplomatic overtures ultimately found success with Britain, which in the 1917 Balfour Declaration lent its support to the creation of a Jewish national “home” in Palestine.

That support took concrete form at the close of World War I when the
League of Nations portioned out the lands east of the Mediterranean Sea to France and Britain as mandates. The legal document establishing the Palestine Mandate included the language of the Balfour Declaration. The pace of subsequent Jewish migration from Europe to Palestine, which had already begun in the late 1800s, began to pick up, with major aliya—or waves of migration—occurring after World War I and in the 1930s. Tens of thousands of European Jews purchased land, settled, and began building new lives, new communities, and new institutions (including collective farms, a labor federation, schools, hospitals, and social services) in Palestine. At that time, however, the vast majority of the existing inhabitants of Palestine (90 percent in 1917) were Arab. They saw Zionism and the influx of Jewish immigrants as threatening to Arab political, economic, and cultural interests.

For a generation, from 1920 to 1947, Britain attempted to manage what would prove to be an intractable conflict. The number of Jews in Palestine grew, as did the amount of land owned and worked by Jews. A rise in Arab landlessness and poverty followed, as the Arabs who had worked the lands purchased by Jews were forced to find employment elsewhere. The Arab community grew increasingly frustrated and despairing. Serious violence between Jews and Arabs broke out in the late 1920s and again in the mid-1930s. The economic strains of the Great Depression, and then Hitler’s execution of millions of Jews during World War II, magnified and sharpened the conflict. In 1947, Britain, exhausted by the war and unable to reconcile Jews and Arabs, informed the world it would take its leave of Palestine and turn the problem over to the newly created United Nations.

After sending an investigatory team to Palestine, the United Nations proposed that the territory of the Palestine Mandate be partitioned into two states, with Jerusalem—a city dear to Jews but also to Arab Christians and Muslims—as an international protectorate. The proposed Jewish state would have enclosed 55 percent of the land at a time when Jews represented approximately 32 percent of the population and owned just 6 percent of the total land area. While the Jewish community accepted the partition plan, Palestinian Arabs saw it as unjust and inequitable—and rejected it. This impasse would mean war. With the international community unable to effect a solution, those on the ground prepared to fight. During the mandate years the Jewish community in Palestine had built a military organization, the Haganah, which now went into action seeking to secure the territories the partition plan had designated for the Jewish state. On May 14, 1948, Zionist leaders proclaimed the State of Israel. Almost immediately, the surrounding Arab countries invaded. Israel would be victorious in this war, extending the lands under its control beyond what would have been its borders according to the UN partition. The conflict between the newly created Jewish state and its Arab neighbors continues to the present.
**Pathways from Colonialism**

Israel was becoming a reality in the Middle East at about the same time that Middle Eastern populations were preparing to throw off the yoke of European domination. Egypt and Iraq achieved independence relatively early, in the 1930s (see Table 1.3). A wave of independence achievements then came during and after World War II, with Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia becoming independent—in that order—between 1943 and 1956. Kuwait, Algeria, and (South) Yemen became independent in the 1960s, and the Gulf states of Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE followed in 1971.

Forcing the French and the British to take their leave was a task that varied in difficulty depending on the setting. Kuwait and the UAE had it relatively easy, for in Britain domestic political discontent with the costs of imperialism prompted a more or less unilateral withdrawal. More often, independence was the product of nationalist movements that arose across the region, called on France and Britain to depart, and put pressure on them to do so. These movements tended to take the form of political parties—for example, the Wafd in Egypt, the Neo-Destour in Tunisia, and Istiqlal in Morocco. In Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, nationalist movements used a variety of approaches to get their point across. These ranged from simple entreaties and signature-gathering campaigns, on the one hand, to demonstrations, protests, strikes, boycotts, and sometimes even riots, on the other. The goal was to show France and Britain that attempting to retain control over their Middle East holdings was going to be an increasingly difficult endeavor—and that the costs of staying outweighed the benefits. In all of these cases, the approaches seemed to work. France and Britain came to the negotiating table and granted independence to these countries—all with little to no violence.

Nationalist movements in Tunisia and South Yemen faced comparatively stiffer resistance from France and Britain respectively. In those cases, nationalist contests dragged on longer and involved more violent methods, including bombings and assassinations. By far the most bitter independence battle, however, took place in Algeria. France was willing to let go of Syria—a League of Nations mandate that it was officially obliged to prepare for independence—without too much of a fight after having been the mandatory power there for approximately a generation. But Algeria was a colony, not a mandate, and France had been in control there for well over a century. Algeria had been politically integrated into France, and tens of thousands of French citizens had settled there. When in the 1950s a nationalist party called the National Liberation Front (FLN) took shape, it met stiff French resistance. Algerian independence came in 1962, but only after a bloody, eight-year war that took some 700,000 lives.
In the wake of the physical departure of the imperial powers, however, the extent to which Middle Eastern countries were independent was debatable. Often, nominally independent states maintained political, economic, and military ties to their former masters. While this may seem counterintuitive—after all, there was a great deal of ill will and anger toward the Europeans—newly independent Middle East countries were often too weak to do otherwise. In some instances, they were simply unable to force Europeans to leave completely. For example, while Egypt technically became independent in 1936—becoming a member of the League of Nations that year—Britain still controlled Egyptian foreign policy and the Suez Canal. In other instances, leaders maintained those ties more voluntarily, understanding that they could benefit from ongoing political-military support from and trade relations with their former masters. The postindependence Iraqi regime, for example, received significant British military aid, equipment, and assistance, and allowed Britain to retain basing rights in the country. In Jordan, a British officer, Sir John Bagot Glubb, remained commander of the Jordanian army until 1957.

In many cases, these postindependence ties to European powers either endure to the present day or have been redrawn to the United States, which, with France and Britain exhausted at the end of World War II, rose to become the preeminent Western power and a pivotal external player in Middle East politics. Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria maintained close political, economic, and cultural ties with France, for example. Jordan maintained close ties to Britain, but also cultivated increasingly strong links with the United States over time. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi made Iran a key US political and military ally in the region. And in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states came to depend on the United States for security in the wake of the British departure.

In Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, however, lingering ties to European powers after independence did not survive the powerful domestic dissent they generated. In those societies a power struggle emerged that pitted conservative, established elites who had served France or Britain and presided over enduring ties to their former masters, on the one hand, against a younger, “challenger” generation (often civil servants, workers, students, and peasants) who disagreed with conservative elites on a variety of issues. For example, while conservative elites were content with the economic status quo, challenger forces—often organized into socialist and communist parties—typically were pushing for land reforms, the nationalization of industry, and other redistributive policies designed to remedy what they felt was an intolerably skewed distribution of wealth in their societies. Challenger forces also strongly objected to conservative elites’ enduring ties to Europe. For challengers, European imperialism was a humiliating chapter in the history of their nations, one they could not close the book on until
those ties were broken. Such ties were especially difficult to stomach in the
wake of British support for Zionism. When in 1948 Arab armies were
humiliated by Israel, tensions reached a breaking point. Challenger forces
blamed conservative elites for having failed to shepherd national economic,
political, and military development in ways that would have allowed Arab
states to stand truly independent and militarily victorious in the region.

What followed in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq was a series of coups that
reoriented domestic politics and foreign policy for decades. For challenger
forces, the task at hand was figuring out a way to oust conservative elites
from power. While multiparty elections were being held during these years,
conservative elites (rightly) felt threatened by challenger forces and either
rigged elections sufficiently to ensure conservative victories or simply
ignored their results if they were not favorable. Given that the electoral
route to power was closed, the solution challengers often hit upon was the
army—where officers and recruits often were sympathetic to challenger
views and wielded the coercive power to overthrow the existing regime.
Military coups unfolded in Syria in 1949, in Egypt in 1952, and in Iraq in
1958. The political systems established in their wake cut ties to the West,
established ties with the West’s Cold War rival, the Soviet Union, and pur-
sued redistributive economic policies.

*The Structure and Dispositions of “Founding” Regimes After Independence*

What, then, did Middle East regimes or political systems look like, after all
the dust had settled in the wake of the imperial powers’ departure? Here our
task is to understand the structure and basic policy orientations of “found-
ing” regimes in the region—meaning the first set of stable, patterned, and
lasting dynamics regarding the processes by which leaders were selected
and how those leaders in turn exercised power. Regime-formation processes
in the postimperial Middle East would sort countries into three basic cate-
gories: single-party dictatorships, monarchical dictatorships, and democrat-
ic (or semidemocratic) regimes.

**Single-party systems.** Political systems dominated by single, preponderant
political parties emerged in Syria, pre-2003 Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia,
and South Yemen—all of which were republics ruled in dictatorial fashion
by presidents. In most cases, presidents hailed from militaries, which had
been key institutions of upward mobility for the lower classes. The political
support of the military was a core anchor for these political systems. But
preponderant, ruling political parties also served presidents in their exercise
of power. These parties were massive, with systems of branches organized
throughout these nations’ territories as well as, often, in universities and
workplaces. Presidents typically drew from party cadres to fill key positions in the bureaucracy, in order to ensure that those in charge of implementing policy were loyal. Presidents also used these parties to distribute patronage (jobs and other material perquisites such as food, attractive terms for loans, etc.) to supporters, to socialize young people into the ideals of the regime, and to mobilize people into demonstrations of public support for the regime on important political occasions. Finally, presidents typically structured “elections” so that their ruling parties won either all or the vast majority of parliamentary seats—making parliaments rubber-stamp institutions.

These regimes adopted a state socialist economic development agenda. They used the power of the state to restructure and grow national economies: they nationalized numerous industries; they invested capital in industrialization campaigns; they implemented land reform programs that broke up the estates of large landholders and redistributed them to peasants; and they built massive state bureaucracies to guide and manage the economy and to deliver social welfare services to the masses. Their twin goals were to augment national power by building a thriving economic base and to see to it that all citizens—not just the elite—benefited.

The single-party dictatorships in the postimperial Middle East also subscribed to the ideals of pan-Arab nationalism as articulated by Egypt’s president Gamal Abdel Nasser. He blamed the West for facilitating the emergence of Israel and for dividing Arabs into a number of artificial states after World War I. This weakened Arabs when, according to Nasser and many intellectuals in the region, Arabs in fact constituted their own nation and should have had their own comprehensive state. To restore Arab strength, and to return the whole of the Palestine Mandate to the Palestinians, the divisions wrought by European interference would need to be overcome, and Arab political systems would need to be unified. How this would be accomplished in practice was never clear—and an experiment in Egyptian-Syrian union begun in 1958 ended in failure just three years later—but the ideals played well among Arabs, whose hopes were raised that a renaissance of Arab power and dignity would soon be in the offing. As these single-party systems matured through the 1950s and 1960s, the Cold War was building into a crescendo of bipolar competition. With the United States evolving into Israel’s most important ally, the Middle East’s single-party regimes moved in the direction either of strategic neutrality or of alliance with the Soviet Union.

Monarchies. In the Middle Eastern monarchies—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, Oman, Morocco, Jordan, and Iran—the right to rule stemmed not from elections but rather from claims about the legitimacy of specific families’ indefinite monopoly on power. Depending on the country case, such claims revolved around a family’s historic role in founding the
state (Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) and religious lineage (the royal families of several regional monarchies trace their ancestry back to the Prophet Muhammad, for example). In addition to such arguments about the legitimacy of family rule, royal families relied on a variety of other mechanisms for staying in power. Trusted individuals (often family members) headed up the army, the secret police, and the cabinet. And the oil-rich monarchies used portions of their wealth to provide their subjects with elaborate social welfare benefits (free schooling, health care, etc.) as another way of bolstering subjects’ political loyalty.

Like the single-party dictatorships, Middle Eastern monarchies tended to pursue state-led economic development. The state took the lead in making investments and building industry. The (many) monarchies with oil wealth used a portion of that wealth to establish large public sectors and elaborate extensive social welfare services, as mentioned above. Yet while the monarchies followed economic strategies similar to those of the single-party regimes, they did so without the explicitly populist and redistributionist ethos that often characterized the single-party cases. Neither did the monarchies tend to subscribe to pan-Arab nationalist ideals. Iran was not an Arab country, and thus was marginal to that discourse. The Arab monarchies were threatened by Arab nationalism, in part because in two of the states that advocated Arab nationalism most ardently, Egypt and Iraq, monarchs had been dethroned in very recent memory. In addition, the republican and socialist ethos of those regimes was anathema to traditional ruling royal families and their wealthy, elite political allies.

Thus, while Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Algeria courted Soviet assistance during the Cold War years, Middle East monarchies tended to ally with the United States. For example, Iran under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979) became a US client in the Middle East, advancing US foreign policy objectives in the region and buying US military equipment. Resource-poor Jordan relied on the United States for economic assistance and security guarantees. And while the oil-rich monarchies didn’t need US economic aid, they did rely on the United States for security guarantees. Rivalries between the Middle East’s single-party dictatorships and monarchies thus constituted an important Cold War dynamic in the region.

**Democratic and semidemocratic systems.** In the postimperial Middle East, just three countries had democratic or semidemocratic politics when it came to the ability of citizens to vote incumbents out of office through elections: Israel, Turkey, and Lebanon. All three countries’ constitutional structures featured a president (with Lebanon and Turkey’s having more constitutional authority relative to Israel’s more ceremonial post) alongside a prime minister and cabinet constituted from an elected parliament. In all three countries, parliamentary elections were organized in such a way that
parliaments reflected domestic constituencies in proportional fashion. Israel and Turkey had multiparty systems wherein parties gained parliamentary seats proportionate to the percentage of the vote share each won in elections. In Lebanon, electoral districts and seat allocation practices were designed to represent the country’s myriad confessional groups. Israel and Lebanon were democratic, while significant military influence in politics made Turkey semidemocratic.

Israel and Turkey followed state-led economic development trajectories similar to those selected by single-party and monarchical regimes. In both Israel and Turkey during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the state played a major role in the economy—owning substantial assets and directing the priorities and pace of development. Lebanon, by contrast, was a regional exception during this time, in that it preserved a largely market economy during the heyday of state socialism in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In terms of foreign policy, Israel and Turkey were part of the Western “camp” during the Cold War—Turkey as part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance, and Israel with its superpower backer, the United States. Lebanon was split between forces seeking to orient politics toward the West and others seeking to make Lebanon part of the pan-Arab nationalist fold; indeed, this divide was one of many stresses that sent Lebanon into fifteen years of civil war beginning in 1975.

The (Poor) Performance of Founding Regimes Through the Late 1970s

While state socialist economic development, Arab nationalism, and the confrontation with Israel dominated the rhetorical and policy landscape beginning in the 1950s, by the 1970s their collective failure had become evident. State socialist economies did not produce economic growth and material prosperity over the long run for the Middle Eastern countries that adopted them. Instead, many countries faced bankruptcy and the need, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, to radically restructure the way their economies functioned. Neither did pan-Arab nationalism produce its intended effects. Intra-Arab rivalries—including those between the conservative monarchies and the more radical single-party republics—undermined the dream of Arab unity and strength. The failure of pan-Arab nationalism was underlined—and the ideology discredited—when Arab states suffered another devastating loss to Israel in the 1967 Six Day War. Nearly two decades after Arab states had failed to vanquish the forces of the Jewish state in 1948, in the 1967 war Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt.

These developments undermined the legitimacy of Middle Eastern
regimes—especially the single-party republics. Many analysts have argued that Nasser and the leaders of other single-party states (Syria, Iraq, Algeria, etc.) had made an implicit bargain with their peoples in the 1950s that the regimes would provide their citizens with economic prosperity and victory over Israel—but not political participation, free elections, and accountable government. Now, with regimes failing to deliver on their part of this bargain, citizens in the Middle East became politically restive. Because the monarchies had promoted neither populism nor pan-Arab nationalism, they were not as jeopardized by their failure. Still, the resource-poor monarchies were in difficult economic straits. And all Arab monarchies’ citizens saw themselves at least in part as Arabs rather than just simply as “Saudis” or “Kuwaitis.” Arabs’ inability to overcome Israel perplexed, demoralized, and led many (in monarchies and republics alike) to attempt to diagnose the roots of Arab weakness.

The Making of Middle East Politics

The Iranian Revolution and the Rise of Political Islam in the 1970s

With the region filled with politically dissatisfied citizens trying to discern the reasons Arab regimes failed to deliver, many settled on variations of one basic answer: that Arab governments and society had distanced themselves too much from the teachings and traditions of Islam. The Arab single-party regimes in particular, while paying lip service to Islam, were quite secular in outlook and practice. Meanwhile, Arab societies, especially their middle- and upper-class urban strata, had adopted Western, secular mores and popular culture—including with respect to ways of dressing, decorating, consuming, recreating, and relating to the opposite sex. To critics, these developments undermined Arabs’ Islamic heritage, in turn corrupting and handicapping them in their quest for dignity, prosperity, and power. Such “Islamist” thinkers harked back to the days when the Umayyads, Abbasids, and Ottomans—empires that explicitly incorporated Islam and Islamic law into the public sphere—were in their glory, reasoning that political success stemmed from Islamic foundations.

In countries across the Middle East, Islamic movements emerged. In the very influential Egyptian case we should really say that Islamic movements reemerged, because the Muslim Brotherhood—the region’s first and still one of its most important movements—was founded there in 1928. Established by Hassan al-Banna, a schoolteacher who rejected British political, economic, and cultural penetration of Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood sought to return Egyptians to more pious lifestyles through educational and charitable activities, with the long-run goals of liberating Egypt from European domination, reconstituting the Egyptian state according to sharia law, and pursuing social and economic development. Nasser outlawed the
Muslim Brotherhood, but his successor, Anwar Sadat, allowed it to return to action in the late 1970s to counterbalance his leftist opponents. Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood inspired branches in Syria, Jordan, and Palestine. Similar movements appeared elsewhere, including Tunisia’s Islamic Tendency Movement and Algeria’s Islamic Salvation Front.

These movements received a considerable momentum boost in 1979 when, in non-Arab Iran, Shi’ite cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini brought down Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi by building a broad, heterogeneous political coalition under the umbrella of politicized Islam. From the late 1950s through the 1970s, the Shah had presided over a secular, repressive, Westernizing dictatorship that was tightly allied with the United States, had diplomatic relations with Israel, and gravely mismanaged the Iranian economy despite that nation’s considerable oil wealth. In making those choices, the Shah alienated numerous sectors of Iranian society. Khomeini deftly drew upon Islamic symbols and values to formulate a powerful critique of the Shah’s regime, temporarily unify a wide variety of political factions, and move millions of everyday Iranians to protest—at considerable personal risk—the Shah’s regime in wave after wave of massive demonstrations that ultimately wore down the will of the Shah’s armed forces to resist. On January 16, 1979, the Shah left Iran and headed into exile.

Khomeini returned to Iranian soil on February 1, 1979, and proceeded to build a new political regime there: the Islamic Republic of Iran. This new regime has some significant competitive elements, namely a parliament and a president chosen in contested elections. However, overlaying the presidency and the parliament are the Council of Guardians, tasked with ensuring that all legislation emanating from parliament is consistent with Islamic principles, and the Supreme Leader (Khomeini until his death in 1989, when he was succeeded by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei), a Shi’ite cleric who controls the judiciary, the army, the security services, and the media.

Iran’s Islamic revolution sent a shock wave through the Middle East. For incumbents, the success of an oppositional Islamist movement was very bad news. For Islamists, the Iranian revolution supplied powerful encouragement that there was hope for their cause. Indeed, much of the “stuff” of domestic politics across the Middle East from the 1980s to the present has pitted regimes against oppositional forces dominated by Islamist parties or movements. The comparative strength of Islamist actors—vis-à-vis both incumbents and other oppositional groups—varies from country to country, as do the tactics Islamists espouse. Some groups have chosen violent trajectories and sought to directly overthrow incumbent regimes, while others have rejected violence and agreed to bide their time, “working within the system” as they focus on building their influence in society and in the institutions of the state. With few exceptions, however, Islamists are a political force to be reckoned with, regionwide.
Economic Reform and Democratization Pressures

The rise of political Islam was not the only key new reality in the Middle East in the 1970s. Regimes in the region also confronted two additional phenomena that constrained rulers’ options and put pressure on their positions. First, beginning in the late 1970s and continuing into the 1990s, nearly every Middle Eastern country had to reform its economy, decreasing the state’s role and integrating with the global market economy. Countries have done this to varying degrees—and always reluctantly, because loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) designed to facilitate economic restructuring come with potentially politically destabilizing conditions attached, such as policy changes that may cause serious hardships for citizens at the same time that they deprive regimes of key tools of political influence and control. Second, also beginning in the late 1970s and continuing into the 1990s, a wave of democratizing regime change swept through Southern Europe, Latin America, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Everywhere, political freedom seemed to be on the march.

For the Middle East’s mostly authoritarian incumbent rulers, a new global democratic ethos was unwelcome, as it served to further delegitimize regimes whose constituents were already discontented and who faced increasingly significant Islamist oppositions. Meanwhile, all rulers—democrats and dictators—struggled with painful economic reform processes and worried about how the “losers” would react politically. Did incumbent regimes survive these multiple pressures—from Islamists, economic reform, and global democratizing norms? If so, how did they manage it? And what have these three main challenges confronting the region over the past generation meant for the way that politics is organized in Middle Eastern states today? The chapters that follow hold the answers to these questions.

Part 1 of the book contains seven chapters, one each on an essential dimension of politics and society in the Middle East. These chapters provide an overview of what is happening in the region as a whole. Chapter 2, “Governments and Oppositions,” surveys government-opposition relations in the region. Who holds power? How do they work to stay in power? Who seeks power and how do these oppositional actors attempt to oust incumbents? Chapter 3, “The Impact of International Politics,” offers a framework for understanding how dynamics and pressures outside states’ borders have shaped the domestic politics of countries in the Middle East. Chapter 4, “Political Economy,” analyzes how states have tried to spur economic growth and development, how politics has influenced the substance of economic decisions, and how economic realities in turn impact political dynamics and decisionmaking.
Chapter 5, “Civil Society,” examines how citizens in countries of the Middle East organize for philanthropic purposes and to advance their policy, economic, and social interests—as well as why and how the Middle East’s mostly authoritarian regimes have sought to control, curtail, and contain such activities. Chapter 6, “Religion and Politics,” explores the three monotheistic faiths that emerged in the Middle East, the extent to which states in the region are religious, and the main forms of politicized religious oppositional activism in the region. Chapter 7, “Identity and Politics,” considers how various types of attachments—to religion, language, lineage, and geographic homeland—matter politically. Finally, Chapter 8, “Gender and Politics,” looks at the ways that women’s (and men’s) roles in society have been constructed and contested.

Part 2 of the book builds on these thematic chapters by offering eleven case studies that delve deeply into the details of contemporary political dynamics in twelve of the region’s twenty countries: Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey. Each of these chapters opens with a historical overview and description of the contemporary political structure of the country in question. Each then examines all seven themes presented in Part 1 and how they apply to the country in question.

As the following chapters will demonstrate, a number of key problems, dilemmas, and issues animate politics in the contemporary Middle East. First, as already discussed, the vast majority of political communities in the region are (to varying degrees) authoritarian. Yet citizens everywhere are striving to tame dictators, carve out more political and civil freedoms, advance the rule of law, and generally participate more in public life. Second, generating prosperity that is broadly shared by citizens is a daunting challenge facing the region. A third issue concerns identity: central to understanding politics in the region is the realization that citizens’ self-perceptions in terms of language, lineage, place, and faith inform both their political goals and the tactics they select to achieve those goals. Fourth, an important dilemma for the region’s leaders and peoples is how to relate to the West, and particularly the United States. Western actors are major players on the ground in the region at the same time that they control the purse strings of global financial institutions and offer democracy as a political model—one that some aspire to, and others reject altogether. All of these factors—struggles over the right to participate in politics, economic realities, identity politics, and how to deal with the West—shape the politics of gender norms and struggles over women’s status.

Yet while these challenges and dynamics characterize politics in the region, they are not somehow unique to the Middle East. Indeed, they are on the political agenda of nations around the globe. Moreover, within the Middle East there is a diversity of experience: rich states and poor states,
fiercely secular regimes and Islamic regimes, countries that have cooperative relationships with the West and countries that vigorously confront the West, places where women can’t drive and places where a woman has served as prime minister, and so on. This text will help the reader navigate this “messy reality” to comprehend both broad patterns and trends in the Middle East as well as the diversity of experience that exists within the region.

Notes

1. Note that there are five additional Arabic-speaking countries not included in the Middle East as defined by this text, because their politics do not align with dominant patterns and trends in the region: Mauritania, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, and Comoros.
2. These characterizations of political rights and civil rights are adapted from Freedom House’s methodology statement, available at http://www.freedomhouse.org.