

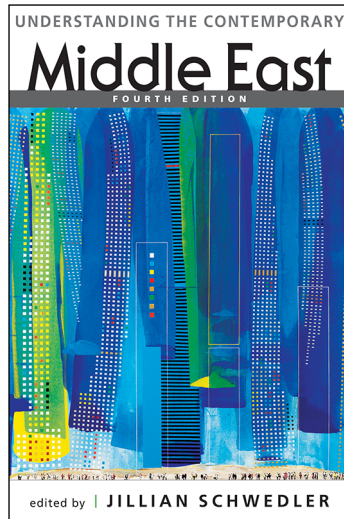
EXCERPTED FROM

Understanding the Contemporary Middle East

FOURTH EDITION

edited by
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ISBN: 978-1-58826-910-2 pb



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This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

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1

Introduction

Jillian Schwedler

To many in the West, the Middle East has always been exotic: a land of endless deserts, warriors wielding sabers on camelback, and veiled women confined to harems. Touring exhibits of the treasures of King Tutankhamun attract long lines and command high ticket prices and, for many, a visit to the Great Pyramid of Giza and a boat ride down the Nile would be the trip of a lifetime. Many students are attracted to courses on the Middle East precisely because of these images, along with more immediate concerns about the global spread of terrorism and the looming energy crisis as oil and natural gas supplies are rapidly being depleted.

In this book we provide a broad but detailed overview of the geography, politics, history, cultures, economies, religions, and peoples of the Middle East. Written by area specialists from diverse disciplines, we address head-on the myths and realities of conventional wisdom about the region, aiming to unpack complex processes without romanticizing the region's cultures or downplaying the very real political violence with which many peoples of the Middle East must live and cope daily. Deserts, harems, tribes, camels, oil, and terrorist groups are all discussed, but so are gleaming skyscrapers, Nobel laureates, a feminist movement dating to the nineteenth century, and the rapid spread of new social media such as Twitter and Facebook. We also discuss in detail the Arab uprisings in which millions of citizens across the region demanded an end to decades of repression, corruption, and neglect by their regimes.

Observers might view the region as a land of inevitable conflict—where the traditional and premodern clash with the modern and global. Of course, tensions do emerge between old and new forms of political, economic, and social structures. But just as often, traditional elements such as



Anne Papp/ActivistHub.org

A young Palestinian checking his Facebook account.

tribes, patriarchy, and religious conservatism take on new forms and roles in their dynamic and changing environments. In many cases, the traditional and the modern turn out to not be the distinct categories we imagine. Traditional tribes have begun to hold internal primary elections prior to contesting national elections; conservative religious groups like the Muslim Brotherhood embrace social media; and virtually every political opposition group frames its grievances in terms of freedom, rights, and democracy—the dominant language of political legitimacy worldwide. The contributors to this volume unpack these various practices, taking a longer historical view but focusing on how the past has helped to shape the contemporary Middle East in an increasingly globalized world. In many ways, how we look at the Middle East has changed significantly since the publication of the previous edition of this book in 2008. We all watched the Arab uprisings in real time, viewing the same images as the protesters themselves and rooting alongside them for the fall of the dictators who had long held the region hostage.

The Middle East has never existed in a vacuum, with international trade routes, struggles from external powers to control the region and its resources, and cultural and scientific exchange dating back centuries. As the world becomes smaller through easy travel and new media, people everywhere are becoming increasingly aware of those connections. Popular Hollywood films such as *Syriana* and *Argo* address some of these complexities, emphasizing that many of the political problems of the region are the direct result of foreign meddling. At the same time, however, they reinforce notions

of a region in turmoil with a future that likely will continue on a bloody and chaotic path. This book challenges that image by providing substantive explanations for the contemporary state of the region and by connecting the local to the regional and global.

What Is the Middle East?

The term *Middle East* refers to those countries that are members of the League of Arab States, plus Israel (with its Jewish and Arab populations), and the non-Arab countries of Turkey and Iran (both of which also have small Arab populations). These countries are clustered into three subregions. North Africa includes the countries of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia as well as the sub-Saharan states of the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan. The area along the eastern Mediterranean is the Fertile Crescent (also called the Levant, its colonial name) and includes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine as well as non-Arab Turkey to the north. Finally, the oil-producing countries of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula include Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, and the non-Arab, Persian state of Iran.

Does it make sense to cluster countries as diverse historically and culturally as, for example, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Somalia, Yemen, and Morocco under the single category of Middle East? It might make more sense to cluster studies around the bodies of water that facilitated historical interactions such as the Mediterranean Sea (so that France, Italy, and Greece would be included in a category with Morocco, Algeria, Israel, Syria, and Lebanon, among others) or the Red Sea (Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen). Similarly, non-Arab Iran is mostly connected to the Middle East as a result of its Islamic heritage and just as easily might be included with Central Asian states, or it might form the core of a cluster surrounding it (Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan). Yemen has strong historical ties not only to the Arabian Peninsula, but also to Malaysia as a result of centuries-old trade routes. Indeed, these connections remain salient today and are visible, for example, on the many commercial signs in the Malay language in Yemen's southern coastal cities.

Yet the category of Middle East does make considerable sense given the shared historical experiences of the spread of Islam, the reach of the Ottoman Empire, and the experiences of European colonialism. The Arab world shares linguistic as well as cultural similarities, although a Syrian, a Moroccan, and an Omani, for example, could easily find much that is different in terms of their actual life experiences. The Islamic world, similarly, has limitations as a category, even though Muslims globally identify themselves

as part of a broader Muslim community, or *umma*. But Muslims—the followers of the Islamic faith—make up a fifth of the global population with some 1.65 billion. Of that number, only some 250 million—less than a sixth of the total—live in the Arab world. The point is not to settle on a better or more accurate category—favoring Middle East over Islamic world or Arab world—but to recognize the myriad ways in which the region coheres as a whole around some issues and less so around others.

As noted above, a common assumption is that Western nations had limited interest in the Middle East until the colonial period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the later discovery of oil. In this erroneous view, the Middle East was largely isolated from the outside world prior to the spread of European colonialism. However, the peoples of the Middle East in fact have been in contact with those in all geographic directions for centuries. Ancient trade patterns have persisted and changed with the advent of different forms of transportation, but pilgrims from all over the globe have trekked to visit the region's many holy sites.

Intellectually, the major works of Greek philosophy were lost to Europe for centuries, but survived in the Arab-Islamic world; they were reintroduced to the West by Arab scholars. During Europe's dark Middle Ages, Muslim as well as Jewish scholars in the Middle East were substantially more advanced in many fields, including science, medicine, mathematics, architecture, literature, the visual arts, and education. The decimal number system used widely today was developed by Arabs who later taught it to Europeans, introducing them to the concept of zero in the process. In terms of ordinary language, English words such as *alcohol* and *algebra* come from Arabic.

Middle Eastern cultural influences in the West extend well beyond science, religion, and mathematics. Since the early twentieth century, numerous Middle Eastern poets and philosophers have gained sizable followings. Edward FitzGerald's nineteenth-century English translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* enthralled Western readers, just as the flower children and peace activists of the 1960s embraced the works of Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran. In the 1990s, the poetry of Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, the eleventh-century Persian mystic, found its way onto bestseller lists in the United States. The Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1988, an honor also bestowed on the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk in 2006. Yet the Middle East retains distinctive features, even as such global connections deepen. This book explains these connections.

The Arab Uprisings

The Middle East never seems to be out of the news, from the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the spread of al-Qaeda during the past decade

and its role in the attacks of September 11, 2001. Most recently, the Arab uprisings that spread across the region in 2011 have been among the most significant global happenings, with reverberations felt in many corners of the world. Like many major events in world politics—such as the outbreak of World War I or the fall of the Soviet Union—the Arab uprisings may have taken much of the world by surprise, but they did not come out of nowhere. In the way that the assassination of Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand is said to have started World War I, the Arab uprisings are now commonly said to have begun with the self-immolation of Tunisian fruit cart vendor Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010. Protests spread throughout Tunisia within weeks, culminating in the resignation of President Zine Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. From there, the revolutionary spirit spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, sparking serious challenges to repressive regimes that just months earlier appeared as stable as they had been for decades.



Jillian Schneider

This graffiti from Tunisia's January 14, 2011, revolution in the town of le Kef portrays the party and regime of Ben Ali as a rat.

But the story is not so simple. In Tunisia, at least two other citizens had self-immolated in the months before Bouazizi, and yet those brutal deaths sparked nothing. In Egypt, protests and demonstrations had been escalating almost steadily since at least 2004, notably as more than a million organized laborers participated in strikes and marches that brought portions of the country to a standstill. While no one predicted the precise timing of the uprisings or that they would begin in Tunisia, many scholars of the region had been documenting what appeared to be growing expressions of dissent, particularly over the past decade. And despite common perceptions, virtually no regime escaped the Arab uprisings. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman have all seen unprecedented challenges to their regimes, even though as of this writing they do not appear in imminent danger of falling. The chapters in this book unpack many of the dimensions that led to the uprisings—economic hardship, corrupt political elites, decades of severe repression and stifled political expression, and complex relations with external powers (including the United States) that supported those regimes.

Organization of the Book

In this book we explore the key themes and controversies of the Middle East in the fields of geography, history, politics, international relations, economics, sociology, demography, anthropology, gender studies, conflict resolution, religion, and literature. Each chapter can stand alone, but the authors also engage directly in the debates in other chapters, particularly when another chapter provides an expanded discussion of a given topic. In Chapter 2, Ian R. Manners, Barbara McKean Parmenter, and Ryan King ask a critical starting question, “What Is the Middle East?” Rather than considering the region as a single, geographical entity, the multiple and shifting boundaries of the region have been shaped (and continue to be shaped) by foreign interventions, cultural change, language, urbanization, the flow of migrant workers and refugees, and the rapid decline in water resources. In Chapter 3, Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. examines the history of the region (and its shifting geographies), from the ancient empires of Egypt and Sumer more than 5,000 years ago to the Middle East we know today. He elaborates on a central theme of the book; namely, that the Middle East has never been a closed or isolated unit.

In Chapter 4, Philip A. Schrodtt and Deborah J. Gerner focus on the domestic politics of Middle Eastern countries, emphasizing the ongoing effects of the colonial legacy as well as contemporary forms of political organization and the various ideologies that offer competing visions of political reform. In Chapter 5, Mary Ann Tétreault explores international intervention, regional alliances, and various regional subsystems. From the colonial period to the Cold War to the Iraq War, the politics of the Middle

East has been intimately connected—in mostly negative ways—with the political agendas and ambitions of the great powers. Chapter 6, by Simona Sharoni and Mohammed Abu-Nimer, is unique to this volume in providing a detailed analysis of a single conflict; it is also unusual in being coauthored by an Israeli Jew and a Palestinian citizen of Israel. Their nuanced discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict examines the history of the conflict through the lens of conflict resolution, a forward-looking perspective that rejects the idea that the conflict is intractable and cannot be solved.

In Chapter 7, Agnieszka Paczynska discusses the economies of the Middle East, with particular attention to contemporary challenges. She examines structural adjustment, trade patterns, and economic trends in light of regional politics and the long history of foreign involvement in the region. In Chapter 8, Mary Ann Tétreault explores the profound ways in which the discovery of oil in the early twentieth century ensured the continued and deep involvement of foreign governments after the end of the colonial period. The first multinational corporations were oil companies, and their heavy-handed efforts to ensure their interests shaped domestic politics in the region.

In Chapter 9, Valentine M. Moghadam looks at the ways in which these economic processes have affected the region's populations. She emphasizes the connections between population growth, urbanization, labor and immigration, (un)employment, poverty, and income inequality, with particular attention to the striking differences that emerge between countries of the region as well as between men and women. In Chapter 10, Laurie King-Irani explores the ways in which kinship networks, class, and ethnicity affect the daily social realities of the peoples of the region. She provides insights into the gender and family relationships that are often a source of confusion to outsiders. Chapter 11 further develops questions of gender, as Lisa Pollard presents a history of complex gender relations and the struggles of women (and men) in the region to reshape gender hierarchies. She emphasizes the diversity of experiences among women in the region, from harem life to participation in high political offices.

In Chapter 12, I examine the historical role of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Middle East, and the ways in which religion and politics have been interconnected historically. I then discuss the role of religion in the contemporary politics of the region, from the emergence of religious extremism to the many and varied ways in which moderate religious activists have engaged peacefully in the pluralist political processes before and after the Arab uprisings. In Chapter 13, miriam cooke describes beautifully the historical and cultural underpinnings of Middle Eastern literature: poetry, short stories, novels, and plays. She shows that literature reflects, as well as influences, its environment—the cultural ferment, the impact of colonization and struggles for independence, and the experience of exile and emigration.

As the richness of Middle Eastern literature remains unknown to most Westerners, this chapter also provides an introduction to the large and growing body of material available in English translations. Finally, in Chapter 14, I outline the challenges facing the region in the twenty-first century, particularly since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings.

The authors seek to challenge some of your existing perceptions about the Middle East while confirming and fleshing out others. Like any region of the world, “reality” is a complicated notation that cannot be fully understood outside of local perspectives. The politics of the region dominate most of the West’s common knowledge, and these chapters aim to make accessible a rich understanding of these complexities. At the same time, a primary goal of this book is to bring to life the lived experiences of Middle Eastern peoples—and many of these will feel surprisingly familiar to you. We hope that you enjoy your exploration of the contemporary Middle East.