

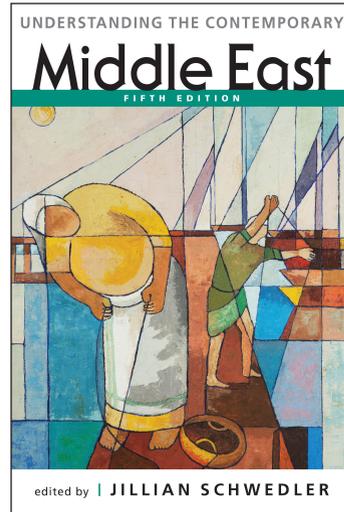
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Understanding the Contemporary Middle East

FIFTH EDITION

edited by
Jillian Schwedler

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
1 Introducing the Middle East <i>Jillian Schwedler</i>	1
What Is the Middle East? 2	
The Impact of the Arab Uprisings 4	
Organization of the Book 6	
2 A Geographic Preface <i>Ian R. Manners, Barbara McKean Parmenter, and Ryan King</i>	9
Boundaries 12	
Aridity and Water 18	
Cityscapes 25	
Conclusion 32	
3 The Historical Context <i>Arthur Goldschmidt Jr.</i>	37
The Ancient Middle East 37	
The Islamic Middle East as an Autonomous System 41	
The Subordination of the Middle East to the West 48	
The Middle East Since World War I 57	
Popular Uprisings in Iran and the Arab Countries 80	
Conclusion 83	
4 Politics <i>Philip A. Schrodt and Deborah J. Gerner</i>	85
The Colonial Legacy 86	
A Changing International Context 88	
Economic Development 93	

vi *Contents*

Informal Structures of Power 94
The Arab Uprisings 96
Prospects for Democratization 98
The Role of the Military 99
Government and State Building 102
Nationalist States 104
Familial and Parliamentary Monarchies 108
Conditional Democracies 115
Conclusion 122

5 International Relations

Curtis R. Ryan and Mary Ann Tétreault 125
States, Sovereignty, and the Western Imperial Impact 126
Local Challenges to State Sovereignty: Boundary Disputes 131
External Challenges: The Middle East and the Great Powers 132
Middle East Regionalism 137
External Intervention and the “New Arab Wars” 139
The Gulf Wars 146
Conclusion 152

6 The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Simona Sharoni and Mohammed Abu-Nimer 157
Palestinians and Israeli Jews:
Identities and Communities in Conflict 158
The History and Dynamics of the Conflict 163
One Land, Two Peoples: Central Issues and
Points of Contention 181
The Rocky Road to Peace: Past and Present
Attempts to Resolve the Conflict 185
Grassroots Peace and Conflict Resolution Initiatives 188
Conclusion 191

7 The Economies of the Middle East

Agnieszka Paczyńska 199
Middle East Economies Before World War II 199
Economic Development Following World War II 202
Labor Migration and Remittances 206
Economic Crises and Structural Adjustment 211
Trade 216
The New Oil Boom 221
The Global Financial Crisis and the Arab Uprisings 222
Conflict and Regional Economies 223
Conclusion 235

8	The Political Economy of Oil <i>Alexander Abraham Alvalade-Ximenes and Mary Ann Tétreault</i>	241
	Industry Structure 242	
	The Politics in Oil's Political Economy 246	
	The Iraq War: A New Oil Regime? 250	
	Oil, Climate Change, and World Order 253	
	The Domestic Effects of Oil Money 255	
	Conclusion 260	
 9	 Population Growth, Urbanization, and the Challenges of Unemployment <i>Valentine M. Moghadam</i>	 263
	Urbanization 264	
	Fertility, Population Growth, and Demographic Transitions 268	
	Labor Force Growth, Migrant Labor, and Employment Challenges 274	
	Poverty and Inequality 283	
	Conclusion 290	
 10	 Kinship, Class, and Ethnicity <i>Laurie King</i>	 295
	Key Concepts 298	
	The Historical Context of the Environment 301	
	Kinship 303	
	Ethnicity 310	
	The Historical Context of Identity Categories 313	
	Social Class 315	
	Kinship, Class, and Ethnicity in Context: Strategies or Straitjackets? 318	
	Conclusion 321	
 11	 The Role of Women <i>Lisa Pollard</i>	 325
	The Middle East and the Woman Question 326	
	Building the Nation Through Women 329	
	Middle Eastern Women Beyond the Woman Question 341	
	Conclusion 352	
 12	 Religion and Politics <i>Jillian Schwedler</i>	 357
	The Historical Role of Religion in the Middle East 358	
	The Experiences of Religious Minorities 363	
	Religion and States 365	
	Religious Activism 370	
	Islamist Groups Since the Arab Uprisings 376	
	Conclusion 379	

13 Literature <i>miriam cooke</i>	381
European Colonialism	381
Cultural Ferment at the Turn of the Twentieth Century	384
The Short Story as a Literary Pioneer	386
Francophone Novels in North Africa	389
The Arabic Novel	390
The Iranian Novel	393
The Turkish Novel	394
The Israeli Novel	395
Drama: Grafting the New onto the Old	396
Poetry and the Hold of the Desert	398
Independence and Its Discontents	400
Emigration and Exile	407
The Muslim State	409
Translation and Recognition	411
14 Looking Ahead <i>Jillian Schwedler</i>	415
The Arab Uprisings and Popular Mobilizations	415
Youth and the New Media	416
The New Arab Wars	417
Conclusion	418
<i>List of Acronyms</i>	419
<i>Basic Political Data</i>	423
<i>The Contributors</i>	437
<i>Index</i>	439
<i>About the Book</i>	461

1

Introducing the Middle East

Jillian Schwedler

To many in the West, the Middle East is an exotic and dangerous land, characterized by suicide bombers, cartoonish dictators, rich oil shaikhs, oppressed veiled women, and religious conflicts that date back millennia—all of which unfold against a backdrop of deserts, camels, and an ancient way of life. Students interested in studying the Middle East are often surprised that courses start with deep discussions of Orientalism and knowledge production: why we think we know what we know about Middle Eastern history, culture, and people. One key starting point is to dispense with speaking of those aspects in the singular—one history, one culture, one people—in exchange for recognizing the diversity across the region on all of those axes. Indeed, travelers to the region even today will discover that some parts of the region feel more like southern Europe, others like central Africa, and still others like Central Asia. They will encounter skateboard parks, lush forests and waterfalls, world-class skiing and snowboarding, and gleaming cosmopolitan cities that feel like New York City, Paris, and Tokyo. They will also encounter vast deserts, veiled women, ancient walled cities, and, yes, pyramids. Thus, like any part of the world, the Middle East is a region of juxtapositions and contrasts. Ancient cities are surrounded by sprawling modern metropolises, extreme wealth abuts grotesque poverty, and brutal autocratic regimes reign over people yearning for freedom, justice, and economic equality.

In this book, we provide a broad but detailed overview of the geography, politics, history, cultures, economies, religions, and peoples of the Middle East. As 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 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.

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 exchanges 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 *Three Kings*, *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 or Greater Syria (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 the 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 1.8 billion. Of that number, only some 270 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.



Michelle Weitzel

Satellite dishes atop roofs in Tangier, Morocco.

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. The peoples of the Middle East, however, 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* came 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 Impact of 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 more extremist offshoot, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Arab uprisings that spread across the region in 2011 raised the possibility of a fundamental reshaping of the region's political and economic order. Despite common perceptions, virtually no regime escaped the Arab uprisings. Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait, and Oman all saw unprecedented challenges to their regimes. Across the region, millions of people took to the streets demanding political and economic reform, with at least four states—Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen—seeing the departure

of their leaders, who once seemed to be presidents-for-life. The leaders of Syria and Bahrain also saw massive protests, but those regimes have so far managed to remain in power.

Thus far, the legacy of the uprisings has been mixed. Yemen, Libya, and Syria entered into civil wars, all of which are ongoing. The old Syrian regime seems poised as of this writing to fully defeat the opposition, while the conflicts in Libya and Yemen are ongoing. The kings of Jordan and Morocco introduced limited reforms to quell more serious challenges to their regimes, but their power appears today as strong as ever. Only Egypt and Tunisia underwent the kinds of substantive reforms that might lead to more democratic political systems. In Egypt, democratic parliamentary and presidential elections brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power, but both parliament and the president were forced out a year later in a military coup backed by protests expressing concern about Egypt moving toward theocracy. Today, Egypt has a military regime, and one that is arguably more repressive and closed than existed under Hosni Mubarak. Only Tunisia has developed a multiparty democratic system. Even in that case, however, the jury is out as to whether Tunisia's democracy will prove stable in the long run or be overtaken by new or old forces who concentrate power even as they continue the guise of pluralism and multiparty elections.

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. They examine the uprisings themselves and the periods of transition and regime consolidation that followed. While many analysts treat the Arab uprisings as an episode that has passed, in many ways the uprisings are ongoing. Protesters regularly take to the streets in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan, and Lebanon. In Bahrain, the regime destroyed the site and symbol of the uprisings—the Pearl Roundabout intersection—and brutally crushed the 2011 demonstrations. But Bahrainis have taken their resistance to outlying areas, continuing to burn police stations and stencil the Pearl Roundabout symbol on walls across the capital city of Manama. Algerians, too, have been protesting virtually nonstop in large and small numbers. While that country did not see a massive uprising in 2011, tens of thousands of small protests took place every year. In 2019, as ailing Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced he would run for a fifth term, Algerians launched their own uprising demanding the fall of the regime. In April, he resigned under pressure and was replaced by an acting president at the time this book went to press. Sudan, too, saw an uprising in 2019, which led a military transitional council to force out longtime president Omar al-Bashir in April.

The takeaway from these and other protests is that judging the success or failure of particular protests should be measured not in months or a few

years but across a decade or more. The region has a long history of mass resistance, from the anticolonial movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, to the nationalist and independence movement of the mid-twentieth century, to ongoing protests against repressive practices and economic policies that benefit the few while leaving the majority of the population in dire economic straits. Massive demonstrations also express dissent for foreign intervention in the region, from the stationing of US troops across the Gulf, to joint war games and military exercises, to foreign investment and development projects that, again, see the few benefit while the majority suffer. In many ways, protest is part of the normal political terrain of the region rather than exceptional outbursts. These outbursts do not suggest an unstable or dangerous region so much as peoples eager to affect the policies under which they live—a sentiment shared across the globe.

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, they show how the multiple and shifting boundaries of the region have been shaped (and continue to be shaped) by myriad 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. Schrodt 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, Curtis R. Ryan and Mary Ann Tétreault explore 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 have 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 that it is coauthored by an Israeli Jew and a Palestinian citizen of Israel. Sharoni and Abu-Nimer's 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 Paczyńska 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, Alexander Abraham Alvalade-Ximenes and Mary Ann Tétreault explore 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 and until today. 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 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 reformist religious activists have engaged 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 second quarter of the twenty-first century.

With this volume, we seek to challenge some of your existing perceptions about the Middle East while substantiating and fleshing out others. Like any region of the world, “reality” is a complicated notion that cannot be fully understood outside 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, much of which will feel surprisingly familiar to you. We hope that you enjoy your exploration of the contemporary Middle East.