

Why the Middle East Is the Way It Is

Philip Carl Salzman

As we enthusiastically follow the “Arab Spring” overthrow of Arab tyrants and dictators, we think, and hope, that “the Arab street” is calling out for democracy and human rights, and that Arab societies are becoming more humane civil societies. But our enthusiasm and expectations are based less on an understanding of the Middle East and North Africa than on a sense of what we would do if we were members of “the Arab street.” This benevolent projection of our own values and understandings is in practice ethnocentric, for we assume that our views are also held by Arab actors, whereas in fact they have their own distinct views, motives, and goals.

A Doonesbury cartoon about Iraq pictures an American officer and an Iraqi officer in a Humvee driving to arrest an Iraqi. “Intel wants us to capture the guy alive,” the American says. “This will not be possible. I am sworn to vengeance!” says the Iraqi officer. “A member of his family killed a member of mine!” “What?” says the American, “When did this happen?” “1387,” says the Iraqi. “What is the *matter* with you people?” says the American.¹

What is the *matter* with those people? What “the matter” is, is that Iraqis have a different culture than Americans. Iraqis see things differently. The assumptions about social and political relationships, the frameworks for assessing them, and the imperatives for action instilled by their culture lead Iraqis to understand situations in a different way from Americans. The same is true with other Middle Easterners and North Africans, who share much of a cultural perspective with the Iraqis.

However, in order to understand Iraqis and Middle Easterners, or anyone else, really, we have to consider two levels of culture: deep culture and surface culture. Deep culture involves those assumptions and frameworks that are so taken for granted that they are usually unspoken and unconsidered by those who hold them. Surface culture consists

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Beluchistan, c. 1968-1976. © Philip Carl Salzman.

of current understandings, analyses, and values that are seriously held but open to discussion and subject to change with changes in circumstances.

Deep Culture

There are three tenets of Middle Eastern social relations. These are: only trust your kin, always side with closer against more distant, and never trust the state. Now, you might ask, “why these tenets, and where did they come from?” The historical answer is that the foundational culture of the Islamic Middle East is the culture of Bedouin tribes. Before and during the advent of Islam, the population of Arabia, which was the entire total of the Arab world, consisted of Bedouin tribes. Under the expansionary influence of Islam, Bedouin tribes conquered the world from Morocco to India. They carried with them their segmentary tribal organization with its assumptions of kin-group responsibility and closest-kin loyalty. In North Africa, except in the Nile Valley, they conquered Berber tribes with much the same ideas. In the peripheries of Iran and in Afghanistan, they conquered Iranian tribes that also held similar ideas. This tribal culture remains a major factor everywhere in Morocco, Algeria, and Libya; in the peripheries of other Arab countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Arabia, and Iraq; and in the peripheries of non-Arab countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Just as in previous millennia, tribes that stopped or settled in urban areas infused local culture with tribal norms.

These three tenets of deep Middle Eastern culture shape political relations in the following ways²:

(1) First, each individual is part of a kinship group: whether a family, lineage, clan (tribal section), or tribe. These groups are defined by patrilineal descent, descent

through the male line from a common ancestor. These groups are usually referred to by the name of the apical ancestor. Individual identity tends to be defined at least partly by such group membership. Each group is vested with responsibility for the wellbeing of its members. All group members are collectively responsible for the defense, vengeance, and welfare of each member. Correspondingly, each member has obligations toward the other group members, and the honor of the individual rests on their fulfillment. Loyalty to the group is expected. Most individuals feel that their kin group is the main social and political resource that they can count on, and that it is their ultimate safety net.

Living and doing research among the members of the Shah Nawazi (Yarahmadzai) nomadic tribe in Iranian Baluchistan, I resided for most of my stay with the Dadolzai lineage, the descendants of Dadol.³ The Dadolzai define themselves as a *brasrend* (*bras* = brother; *rend* = line), a lineage of brothers, which is the minimal lineage responsible for defense and retaliation. The members, men and women alike, think of themselves as Dadolzai, and outsiders think of them as Dadolzai. If trouble arises, their first thought is to turn to their *brasrend* for help.

(2) Second, one should always ally with closer kin against more distant kin, and with more distant kin against other tribes or other peoples. Who is closer and who more distant is determined by descent. Nearer ancestors define smaller groups, while more distant ones define larger, more inclusive groups. Closer kin have common recent ancestors, while more distant kin share ancestors farther up the genealogy. Each individual can trace his or her descent to close ancestors, and thus define a small group of close kin, or more distant ancestors, and thus define a larger group of more distant kin. In other words, each individual is a member of a set of nested groups, the smaller ones defined by recent ancestors, the larger ones defined by distant ancestors. In this sense, group membership is relative to the situation, usually depending upon who one is in conflict with. If someone is in conflict with a relatively close kinsman, say someone descended from the brother of his own recent ancestor, then just the small groups defined by descent from the two brothers would be activated. But if members of different clans or tribes are involved in a conflict, then people think of themselves as members of clans or tribes, and activate the clan or tribe as the conflict group. This balanced opposition reduces the possibility of a group facing uneven odds.

I can illustrate this dynamic with a case that I observed in Baluchistan.⁴ I was living with the Dadolzai in their date groves at Mashkel on the Iran-Pakistan border, where they resided during the summer date harvest. Mahmud Karim had cut down an old palm and was going to use the trunk as a rafter for his mud brick hut. When he went back to the grove to get it, however, he found that a Kamil Hanzai, from the neighboring settlement, had carted it off. Karim, furious, turned to his fellow Dadolzai for support. A party of about a dozen men, with simple weapons, was formed to retrieve the trunk. They were able to do so without resistance from the Hanzai. Just after this event, news came that a respected senior man of the Soherabzai tribal section, to which

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both the Dadolzai and Hanzai belong, had been attacked by members of the Rahmatzai tribal section. Immediately the Dadolzai and Hanzai set aside their recent incident and came together as members of the Soherabzai tribal section in opposition to the Rahmatzai tribal section. And so began an on-again, off-again sectional conflict that encompassed two of the three tribal sections, the entire tribal territory, and lasted for a half dozen years.

(3) Middle Easterners regard states as criminal organizations to be distrusted, avoided, and, whenever possible, defeated and conquered.⁵ States are rivals of kin-based organization. Pre-industrial states—whether kingdoms, caliphates, or empires—are centers of power that compete with and try to suppress other forms of power. States are hierarchical, centrally organized, and parasitic on the primary producers under their control. Kin groups and tribes are substantially egalitarian and decentralized, with decisions made in assembly. Freedom and autonomy are characteristic features of tribes and are highly valued. States want to extract wealth from their subjects through taxes; they want to draft members of the populace into the army, which is their tool of control and expansion for capturing more wealth; and they want a monopoly of coercion and commonly forbid weaponry to their subjects. All three of these are great violations of freedom that subjects prefer to avoid. Tribes are best situated to avoid them successfully. It has not been uncommon, in the history of Middle Eastern states, for tribes to avoid taxes, the military draft, and the ban on weapons, often by state regulations that exempt them, while imposing taxes, the draft, and the ban on the peasantry. But states would prefer to impose these on tribes, and would do so if they could. In short, states are seen as the enemy.

There is another dimension to the impact of the hierarchical, coercive state on the populace. In the Middle East, under Islam, there is no notion of divine kingship, and Islamic ideas of equality do not support governmental institutions or elevate holders of state offices, who are seen as men like everyone else.⁶ At the same time, concepts of honor, derived from collective tribal obligations, require individual autonomy. To have honor, one must be autonomous and not subject to the orders of another. This means that state laws and potential coercion take away the honor of the subjects of the state. This engenders resentment and undermines any legitimacy the state may have in the eyes of its subjects. This conflict between state rule and honor is a very serious structural contradiction in Middle Eastern society and is a major factor in the instability of governments, and the reliance of governments on coercion.

“Wait,” you say, “this is the twenty-first century. Can it be that tribes are still existent, not to mention important?” Let us remind ourselves of some recent events in the Middle East. A very important development in Iraq was the so-called Sunni Awakening, followed by the formation of the Sons of Iraq. The Sunnis were in rebellion against the administration and the foreign intervention because of the ending of dominance by the Sunni minority in favor of the Shia majority. This was true of the Sunni tribes throughout Iraq. But just around the time of the “surge” by American troops, the Sunni tribes did have an “awakening.” These tribes, above all those in al Anbar Province, the large western desert province, were increasingly feeling put upon by the foreign fighters from Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, and Arabia. Many of these men affiliated with Al Qaeda



Baluchistan, c. 1968–1976. © Philip Carl Salzman.

in Mesopotamia entered Iraq from the west and thus directly into al Anbar Province. These foreign *jihadis*, mostly young and always armed, without any previous direct experience of Iraq, felt free to swagger around, act arrogantly toward local people, and interfere with the local girls. What these foreign *jihadis* did not seem to appreciate was that the local Iraqis were tribesmen, and that they expected their guests to act respectfully in their tribal homelands. When the *jihadis* proved intractable, the Iraqi tribes mobilized militarily against their supposed *jihadi* allies, and armed clashes ensued. The Iraqi tribes then turned to the Americans, their erstwhile enemies, for up-to-date arms and support. This Sunni awakening was the end of the Sunni rebellion in Iraq and went far toward guaranteeing the success of the American surge. Here tribes were the critical actors in the turn against Al Qaeda in Iraq.

Another example of the continued importance of tribes can be seen in Iranian Baluchistan, which has changed considerably and not necessarily for the better. The Islamic Republic of Iran regime targeted Baluchistan with a program of urbanization and immigration as a means of transforming this remote province bordering Pakistan. While the Baluch are (almost all) Sunni Muslims, the Islamic Republic is dominated by Shia Muslims who take a triumphalist approach to religion. The immigration into Baluchistan that has been encouraged has been that of majority Shia Persians from other parts of Iran, a process that appears to the Baluch to be a religious and cultural invasion. A violent resistance has sprung up to defend Sunni Baluch and to insist on their rights; this resistance is called the Jondallah, Soldiers of God. It is manned largely by the Rigi tribe of the Sarhad region of Baluchistan. We see here the mobilization of tribal warriors in opposition to external encroachment.

Meanwhile, in Yemen, at the time of writing, thousands of tribesmen—members of the powerful Hashid tribal federation—have flooded into the capital, Sanaa, and are

fighting the security forces of President Saleh, with the aim of deposing Saleh. Yemen, outside of the irrigated valleys and towns, is heavily populated by tribes. No national order is possible without the tribes playing a role.

A further example, much in the news, is the rebellion and civil war in Libya. The population of Libya is almost exclusively made up of Bedouin, all affiliated with tribes. For the greater part of the past millennium, they were mostly taken up with making a nomadic living by raising their livestock and growing grain, and with intra-tribal and inter-tribal feuds. All men were warriors, save a few religious figures, and livestock raiding and feuds were continuously carried out for security, fun, and profit. Winners in tribal wars secured good territories with pasture and water, and received honor; losers were chased off, honorless, some to challenge and conquer other tribes, some to settle as peasants in the Nile Valley and elsewhere.

But a major disruption of normal tribal life occurred just prior to the First World War when Italy invaded Libya, trying to recoup old Roman territory.⁷ The Bedouin tribes patched up their age-old differences, uniting in the face of the infidel Christians. Fighting initially by charging the heavily armed Italians with unbridled enthusiasm, the Bedouin adjusted their tactics to a safer and more effective guerrilla campaign. After largely holding the Italians at bay in the first war, the Bedouin faced a second Italian war initiated and carried out relentlessly by the Fascists in the 1930s. The Bedouin population and livestock incurred massive losses and were overcome by the Italians, only to be saved by the Italian defeat in World War II. After the war, Britain set up the Kingdom in Libya, uniting the disparate regions of Tripolotania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan. The King governed for a decade and was then overthrown in a military coup by Colonel Qaddafi.

Qaddafi advocated direct democracy in governance, in the Bedouin style, while hypocritically keeping oil money—the main source of state funds—and the military in his own hands.⁸ His bureaucracy of young, educated men had to work through tribal elders to get things done, and electoral politics were often inter-tribal conflict by other means. Qaddafi relied on his fellow tribesmen and related tribes for allies in governance and the military. One of the important developments in the current civil war in Libya is the decision by some major tribes to go over to the opposition. But it is also important to understand the regional factor. Tripolitania, the western part, and Cyrenaica, the eastern half—both named as such by the Romans who lived there—never felt much unity. The tribes in Cyrenaica, followers of the Sanusiya Sufi Order, eventually fought the Italians under the designation “Sanusi,” which came to stand for the Cyrenaican people. The Tripolitanian tribes were not followers of the Sanusiya Order, and felt no solidarity with the Cyrenaican tribes. When the Kingdom of Libya was established after WWII, the head of the Sanusiya Order, Idris, who had been hiding out in Egypt under the protection of the British, was made King of Libya. This did not sit all that well with the Tripolitanians. When Qaddafi, with Tripolitanian support, deposed King Idris, the Cyrenaicans were not pleased. So, in the current civil war, it is not a great surprise that the initiative and main body of rebellion came from Cyrenaica, where they now fly the old flag of the Kingdom of Libya. Another particular feature of the “Libyan Spring” is that it immediately took the form of military rebellion, unlike its predecessors in Tunisia and Egypt, where

demonstrators were peaceful. How can we understand this? The answer, I think, is the Bedouin heritage of Libya, in which every man is a warrior, while in Tunisia and Egypt peasants predominate. The same influence is present in Yemen, where the rebels are Bedouin tribesmen who have taken up armed rebellion.

While in Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, Bedouin tribesmen predominate, and in Algeria and Morocco Berber tribesmen make up a large portion of the population, peasants predominate in Tunisia and Egypt. Even if the peasantry originated in Bedouin tribes, they have largely left behind that tribal affiliation and lifestyle. Less accustomed to tribal feuds, cut loose from the larger tribal groups, peasants are slower to turn to military action. But this does not mean that Middle Eastern peasants do not share the tribal tenets: only trust your kin, always side with closer against more distant, and never trust the state. Peasants too have faith only in their families, but their families are small and relatively weak. Peasant kinship is often bilateral rather than based on unilineal descent, so, with all families overlapping, there are no clear-cut closer and more distant kin. And while peasants do not trust the state, they are neither sufficiently unified nor mobile to challenge it very easily. When peasants and tribesmen move into cities, as they have increasingly done during the twentieth century, they do not leave behind these three tenets, but rather import them into their urban life and follow them accordingly.

So far we have considered the first two tenets—only trust your kin and always side with closer against more distant—in terms of kin relations. Certainly, balanced opposition often develops in terms of different-sized kin groups: family vs. family, small lineage vs. small lineage, large lineage vs. large lineage, tribal section vs. tribal section, tribe vs. tribe, tribal confederacy vs. tribal confederacy. But not all such oppositions in the Middle East are based on kinship. Others are based on ethnicity and religion. What I believe is clear is that these larger oppositions, using non-kin criteria, have been built on, and have incorporated, the balanced, structural opposition characteristic of the tribal socio-political structure. Reflecting this structure, ethnic and religious differences are seen as political oppositions.

For example, in Iraq, the main ethnic opposition is between Semitic-speaking Arabs and Iranian-speaking Kurds, but other oppositions include the Kurds vs. Turkic-speaking Turkmen and Arabs vs. Turkmen. In Turkey, the main opposition is between Turkic-speaking Turks and the Iranian-speaking Kurds. In Algeria and Morocco, the main ethnic opposition is between Arabs and Tamazight-speaking Berbers. In Iran, it is between Iranian-speaking Persians and Turkic-speaking Azeri Turks, Iranian-speaking Kurds, Iranian-speaking Baluch, and Semitic-speaking Arabs. These ethnic differences commonly are seen in terms of political oppositions and have frequently developed into political and military conflict.

The astonishing growth of Islam in the seventh century depended entirely on converting Bedouin tribesmen.⁹ It is thus understandable that the structure of Islam had to be compatible with, and reflect, Bedouin tribal structures. Built into Islam is the foundational distinction between Muslims and infidels—dwellers in the Dar al Islam, the land of belief and peace, and the Dar al Harb, the land of unbelief and war. So at the highest level of organization—for Islam was indeed organization at a

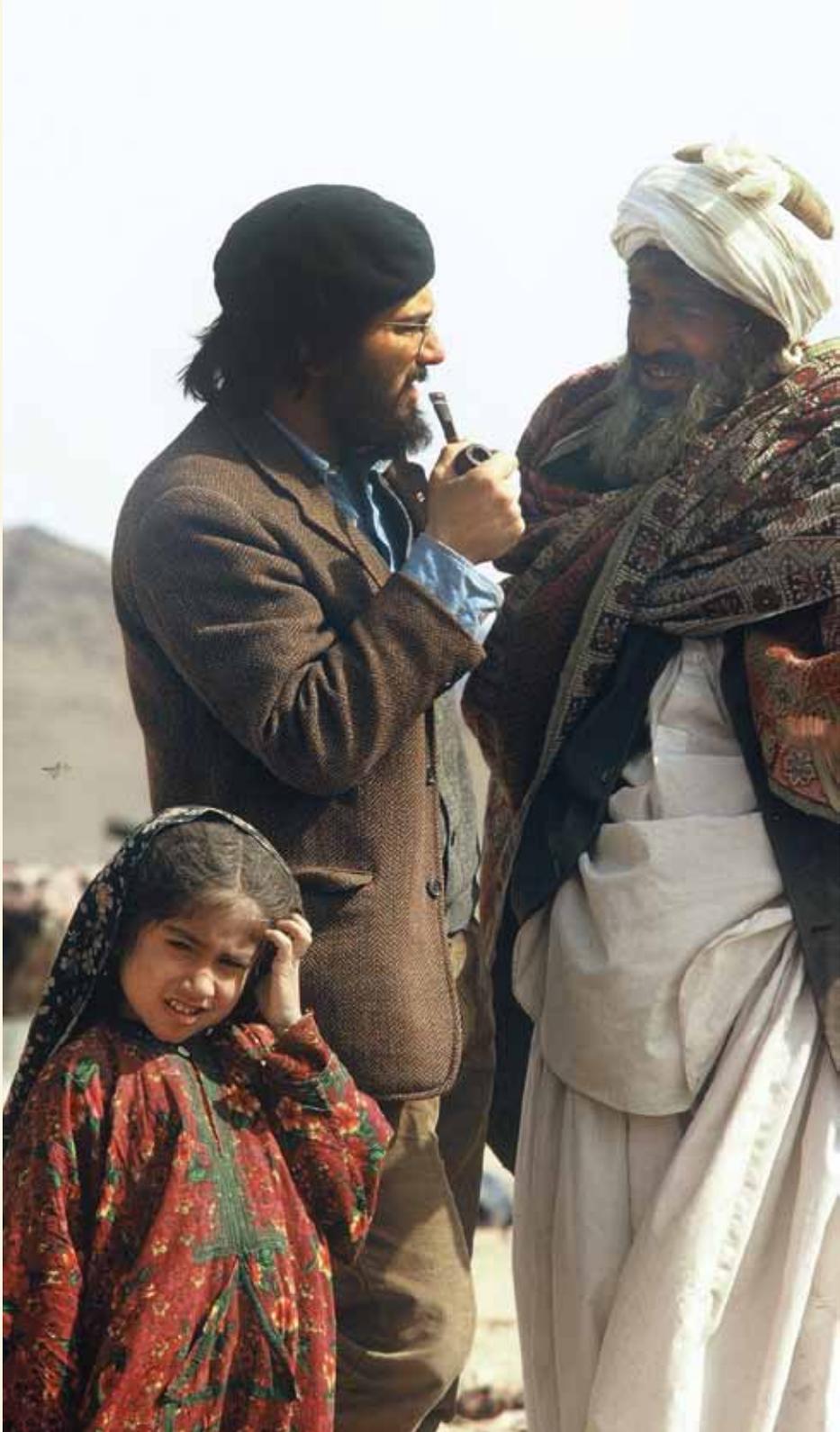
higher level of generality than tribes and tribal confederations—there was a balanced opposition between Muslims and infidels. And when splits developed in Islam, the resulting sects fell into balanced opposition.

The most important today is the split between Sunni Muslims, called the followers of tradition, and Shia Muslims, called the party of Ali. These two major divisions of Islam derive from disagreement about which line of Mohammed's relatives in Mecca should be recognized as his legitimate successors and leaders of Islam. The Sunni and Shia divide also according to which of the two main principles of tribal organization should determine the caliph: consent or descent, in this case, consent of the *umma*, the community of Muslims, or direct descent from the Prophet. Sunni and Shia face off in opposition in Iran, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Pakistan and were the source of the recent civil war in Iraq. Other religious oppositions include Muslims vs. Coptic Christians in Egypt, Muslims vs. Jews in Palestine/Israel, and Muslims vs. Baha'i in Iran. Of course, while these oppositions are conceptually balanced, they are not necessarily demographically or politically balanced, with Shia being a minority in Saudi Arabia, Sunni being minorities in Iraq and Iran, Copts a minority in Egypt, and Baha'i a minority in Iran.

Always siding with closer against more distant does not, in the Middle East, mean "my group, right or wrong." There is no independent criterion of right and wrong. Siding with my group is right; not supporting my group is wrong. Period. Good and bad in the Middle East is defined by responsibilities in relationships. Fulfilling your social responsibilities by acting loyally toward your group is what defines good. Failing to fulfill your social responsibilities by not acting loyally toward your group is what defines bad, immoral, and evil. Under these circumstances, social pressure is immense. Even more important, people's understanding and expectations are based on the tribal model and the three tenets.

What are the effects of the tribally oriented culture and the three tenets? Middle Eastern society is very fissiparous, splitting up into groups, each of which is its own reference point. This means that people's interests and projects must be oriented toward group-centrism and cannot be inclusive. The only way to reach out across boundaries between groups is in opposition to some other large group. With the reference always being groups, with good defined by group loyalty, there can be no reference to universal rules; in short, there is rule by groups, not rule by law. And government is only satisfactory if it is in your group's exclusive hands and always unsatisfactory if it is in another group's hands. So there can never be legitimate governance for all. Consequently, without the consent of the public, every Middle Eastern government must rely on coercion—on police, secret police, and the army—and on selective rewards for group supporters alone.

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Baluchistan, c. 1968-1976. © Philip Carl Salzman.

Surface Culture

In contrast to deep culture, which is a basic framework that does not usually change over time, surface culture is a set of understandings, precepts, and rules that is framed in response to circumstances that people face in shorter or longer periods. As circumstances change from time to time due to shifts in environmental factors, technological development, demographic trends, economic conditions, and political alliances, surface culture changes. In a sense, it is an adaptation to the transitory circumstances in which people find themselves in a particular period. A simple example that we are all familiar with is the tendency in North America for people to buy large cars and trucks when fuel is inexpensive and to grant prestige to owners of these large, impressive vehicles. But when fuel becomes expensive, scarce, or thought to be harmful to the environment, people start speaking of the social or environmental immorality of owning large vehicles, and many buyers switch to smaller ones, taking pride in fuel efficiency and the environmental purity of their vehicles. Under the latter circumstances, some members of the community take on the role of blaming and shaming by putting denunciatory stickers on large vehicles. The government is pressed to, or does, institute measures of taxation and other sanctions to discourage the purchase or use of large vehicles. But when fuel drops in price and becomes readily available, and people stop worrying about the environment, the purchase of large vehicles increases and that of small vehicles decreases.

The circumstance in the Middle East that I would identify as determinant of political surface culture in the twentieth century is the decline of Muslim dominance in the circum-Mediterranean region. Recall that from the seventh through the fifteenth century, Muslims dominated everywhere, with Christians conquered or in retreat. Even with the loss in 1492 of the Iberian Peninsula by the Arab and Berber occupiers, the Ottoman Empire continued to expand in the eastern Mediterranean, in Eastern Europe, and in North Africa until the Battle of Vienna in the late seventeenth century. For a thousand years, Muslims could take pride in their dominance, leaving aside the unfortunate and highly destructive Mongol invasions. But by the eighteenth century, Europe began its technological and political rise, slowly pushing back the Ottomans.

A brief aside here on the Arabs, who take great pride in being the originators and carriers of Islam, in speaking God's language, and in spreading Muslim domination through much of the known world. They look back to Mohammed's time, and the time of the first righteous caliphs, as a time of ideal behavior and spiritual purity, as well as a time of great military triumphs. But conflicts among Muslims across the huge region, and later problematical leadership, led to disorder and disunity among Muslims. The Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century devastated Persia and Mesopotamia, destroying much of the population and infrastructure of the Arabs. This was a blow from which the Arabs never quite recovered. The mantle of the caliphate was taken up eventually by the Ottoman Turks, who came to dominate the Arab lands also. About the Turks, the Arabs were and are ambivalent. On the one hand, Islam was the Arabs' creation and heritage, so they should be recognized as first in Islam. But, on the other hand, the vital Ottomans proved capable of becoming Islam's champion, and on those

grounds the Arabs had to support them. (This oversimplifies a complex relationship, variable over time and space.) So, even before the rise of the West, the Arabs had lost their predominance, a loss that they felt strongly. Let us recall that defeat, loss of dominance, and subservience means, in the Middle East, loss of honor. And loss of honor means loss of manhood, loss of pride, and shame.

With the rise of Europe, and faced with military and political reverses, the Ottoman Empire lapsed into denial, as they knew they were destined to dominate, and could not imagine infidels were worthy of serious concern.¹⁰ This was a weakness in the Ottoman Empire and in Islamic culture: lack of curiosity about the opposition—the other peoples and cultures outside of their realm. Eventually it was accepted that the challenges were real, that the Empire had fallen behind in important respects, and that some modification, some renewal would be necessary. Emulation of Western technology and organization, especially in the military, was pursued, and changes adopted. Slowly through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, an appreciation grew, among some educated individuals at least, of the development in Europe, and the virtues of European culture and citizens that brought such development about. European curiosity about the world,

disciplined research, systematic education, disciplined work, and well ordered organization all came to be admired and recommended by some Middle Eastern observers.

But as Europe gained strength, the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East fell into relative weakness. Finally, after WWI, the Empire, for some time having been called “the sick man of Europe,” was disbanded, and the provinces of the Empire

distributed, first to European countries as mandates of the League of Nations, and then as independent countries. Still weak, the new Arab countries of the Middle East continued under the domination of Europe. Emasculated and shamed, the Arabs looked for a way to regain their feet, and their honor. Three major movements were attempts at reclaiming their independence and stature: Arab nationalism, Arab socialism, and modernization.

With the 1952 military coup in Egypt overthrowing the decadent kingship, Gamal Abdel Nasser rose to ascendancy as the leader of the Arab world. Nasser advocated Arab unity and even the fusing of Arab countries into one. He vowed to erase the blackest mark against the Arabs, their defeat by the despised Jews, and the continued degradation of the Arab world by the brazen existence of the Jewish state of Israel. Much of the Arab world put its hopes in Nasser. Nationalist fervor generated a short-lived (1958–61) union between Egypt and Syria. One of the main justifications for the 1969 military coup that overthrew the King of Libya was that the King’s government was too moderate and too neutral, rather than being a strong supporter of Nasser and Arab nationalism.¹¹ Nasser finally responded in 1967 to expectations and began hostile action against Israel with a naval blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba and mobilization of his armed forces. Israel, however, did not wait for further provocations, but struck immediately, destroying the Egyptian air force on the ground, and deployed its troops,

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which were able to defeat the invading Arab armies in six days. Lands the Arabs had occupied after 1948 that were claimed by the Jews, most notably Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, were then reclaimed and reoccupied by Israel. It was a total defeat for the Arabs, who felt disgraced. The black mark on their souls was now even larger and darker than before.

The Six Day War between the Arabs and Israel was followed by Black September 1970, the bloody but failed attempt by the Palestinians to take over the Kingdom of Jordan, which was saved by its Bedouin army. The Palestinian militants were exiled to Lebanon, where they kicked off the Lebanese Civil War 1975–90, during which 150,000–200,000 people died. By this point, Arab unity is perceived to be a bad and bloody joke. Arab Nationalism is no longer seen as a viable carriage for advancing the Arabs.

The flag of Arab Socialism was carried most consistently by the Baath national socialist parties of Syria and Iraq. Both countries were political despotisms, and both had government-controlled but stagnant economies. Socialism does not seem to work well economically or politically. It increasingly seemed an unlikely savior. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992, socialism came to be recognized in the Middle East as an empty vessel.

Modernization was the great hope of the Arab Liberal Age during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.¹² A select portion of educated Arabs looked with admiration at European institutions and, above all, mindsets, which were seen to be focused on effort and achievement. Modernization appeared to promise bringing the Arab world up to the advanced level of the developed countries of Europe and America. But modernization in the Arab world proved to be less the importing of Western institutions and mindsets than the consumption of modern products without the knowledge, attitudes, or discipline to produce them. The Arab poet and critic Adonis wrote that the combination of what the Arabs imported from the West, on the one hand, and the dominant Arab social and cultural order, on the other, produced a monstrous world:

A “vast desert of imports and consumption” has created a false image of modernity—in fact, “a large swindle,” a world in trappings that have nothing to do with either the Arab world as it really is or with the West. “Our contemporary modernity is a mirage.”... As long as the Arabs fail to understand that there is more to the West than what they have so far found in it—its spirit of curiosity, its appetite for knowledge, its courage before dogma—the “Western” modernity of the Arab world will be a “hired” form of modernity, brought to Arab lands through “trick” or “theft.”¹³

So-called modernization proved to be, for the Arabs, another empty vessel, lacking nourishment for the present and lacking a convincing vision for the future.

Where to turn to save the Arab soul? “Islam is the answer,” say the Muslim Brotherhood. Islam, of course, has been present in the Middle East the whole time, but people have been looking elsewhere. Now that all of the other proposed answers have failed—not least because of the underlying tribal foundation of Middle Eastern culture—Islam is the final contestant. And it has an advantage over all of the others: it

cannot be proven wrong on the field of battle, or in the palace, or in the marketplace. And it reclaims the glorious history of God's gift to the Arabs and the great Arab conquests. The great re-turn to Islam has arrived.

Endnotes

- ¹ Garry Trudeau, "What is the MATTER With You People?" *Doonesbury* (18 February 2007): available at NBC Learn <<https://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/browse/?cuecard=2021>>.
- ² See Philip Carl Salzman, *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (Amherst: Humanity, 2008); and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949) chapter 2.
- ³ Philip Carl Salzman, *Black Tents of Baluchistan* (Washington: Smithsonian, 2000).
- ⁴ Salzman, *Black Tents*, chapter 10; Salzman, *Culture and Conflict*, chapter 3.
- ⁵ Charles Lindholm, *The Islamic Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2002) parts 2 and 3.
- ⁶ Lindholm parts 2 and 3.
- ⁷ Evans-Pritchard chapter 2.
- ⁸ John Davis, *Libyan Politics: Tribe and Revolution* (London: Tauris, 1987).
- ⁹ Lindholm chapter 5.
- ¹⁰ Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Harper, 2003).
- ¹¹ Davis 33.
- ¹² Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
- ¹³ Discussed and quoted in Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs* (New York: Vintage, 1999) 114–15.