An Introduction to
Middle East
Politics

Benjamin MacQueen

Second Edition

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For Adele, Jeremiah and Dashiell

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About the Author

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Preface

The Middle East is a region of contradictory trends. Where repeated political crises appear to threaten regional or global stability, the defining political features of the region have proven remarkably resilient. Recent events, from the uprisings across the Arab world since 2010 and the outbreak of war in Syria, Yemen and Libya, the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, technological innovations, the global financial crisis, and economic and cultural globalisation, have shown that even the most resilient system is not impervious to change.

This volume is an effort to capture the dynamics of a changing Middle East for a new generation of students and readers. In particular, this volume presents a new format of Middle East studies textbook, which captures the importance of issues such as democratisation, political change, human rights, political economy and the increased centrality of states such as Iraq, Egypt and those of the Gulf, as well as recognising the importance of politics in 'non-core' areas such as Yemen, Sudan, and North Africa. In saying this, it certainly does not seek to present a comprehensive re-writing of the modern political history of the region. The goals are much more modest: to reframe discussions, debates and themes in a way that make it more suitable and adaptable to a changed region in a changed world.

The lessons of the uprisings that have gripped the Arab world since 2010, the so-called 'Arab Spring', are useful here. Whilst these events took both governments and analysts by surprise, they did not emerge from a vacuum. Indeed, one need only look at the events during and after October 1988 in Algeria to see how rioting over food prices, housing shortages, unemployment and general government misman-agement could push an established authoritarian regime to the brink of collapse and also result in a long-running civil war. A critical message here is that debates on democratisation, human rights and economic dependency were already present but needed to be reinvigorated and given new dimensions with the emergence of technological change, environmental concerns and the ever-changing pressures of globalisation.

In an effort to capture this, the second edition of *An Introduction to Middle East Politics* provides historical, thematic and case study chapters and sections. The first three chapters of the book unpack the key periods in regional history leading to the development of the modern state system in the Middle East, with a particular focus on the interplay between Ottoman rule, colonial governance and the early years of

independence. Where this historic background is critical, it is presented in such a way as to emphasise the political, social and economic legacies of these periods, particularly in terms of the emergence of the key political ideologies that have profoundly impacted the course of politics in the modern Middle East.

This is reflected in Chapters 4, 6, 7 and 8, where the key themes in the political dynamics of the modern Middle East are explored in detail. These chapters are centred on discussions relating to dominant ideological narratives, authoritarianism and political repression, economic dependency, with a particular focus on the role of oil, and key security issues. In exploring these themes, the volume combines significant detail of specific events and cases grounded in the key debates to provide greater understanding of the historic political trajectory of the Middle East. These debates include the supposed authoritarian exceptionalism of the Middle East and North Africa, the impacts of economic dependency and rentier-style economies, and conventional and new security threats such as terrorism and political violence.

Chapter 5, as well as Chapters 9, 10 and 11 focus on four continuing crises that have continued to define regional political affairs: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, US interventionism in the region, democratisation and the Arab uprisings, and the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis. Where discussion over US interventionism in the region is dominated by issues relating to both Afghanistan and, previously, Iraq, the discussion here also examines the controversies around patterns of intervention in Somalia and Yemen, including the controversies related to new security tactics such as drone strikes. This thematic approach to the crises continues in the examination of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, with a focus on the stalled Peace Process. Whilst this covers key elements of the process, it also explores factors such as competing norms of self-defence and self-determination. The Arab uprisings are explored with an emphasis on whether they represent a move toward a new democratic future for the region. Finally, the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis is discussed in the context of external intervention and regional power balance, with an effort to draw out and highlight the human cost of on-going conflict and external intervention, with the displacement of over 10 million Syrian people since 2011.

With the learning tools contained here and on the companion website, including key learning objectives, extensive timelines, study questions and suggested further readings, it is hoped that this volume provides an engaging and thought-provoking overview of Middle East politics.

Acknowledgements

Note on Transliteration

There are a number of transliterated terms used in this volume, particularly from Arabic to English but also from Farsi (Persian), Turkish and Hebrew. As with all transliteration, emphasis is placed on consistency. Where possible, explanatory notes will be given with the transliterated text (with the transliterated text in *italics*). For the Arabic transliterations, the letter ع ('ayn') is represented by the figure `, as in Shi`a or *Qur`an*. There is no equivalent letter in English, but it is conventionally understood as a 'glottal stop'.

About the Online Resources

An Introduction to Middle East Politics 2nd edition is supported by a wealth of online resources for both students and lecturers to aid study and support teaching, which are available at https://study.sagepub.com/macqueen2e

For students

- **Chapter summaries** taken from the book to reinforce your learning goals.
- Links to the key **historical documents** referred to throughout the book.
- A complete **timeline** of the key dates and events covered in the book.
- Read more widely! A selection of *free* **SAGE journal articles** supports each chapter to help deepen your knowledge and reinforce your learning of key topics. An ideal place to start for assignments.
- 1 video from the **SAGE Video Collection** to bring your learning to life.

For lecturers

- **PowerPoint Slides,** which can be downloaded and customized for use in your own presentations.
- **Maps, figures and tables,** ready to be downloaded into your own lecture slides.

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The Ottoman Empire and its Legacy in the Middle East

Learning Objectives

This chapter will enable a greater understanding of:

♦ The importance of religion and empire in the pre-Ottoman Middle East.
♦ The diversity of ethnic and religious communities in the Middle East.
♦ The ruling structures of the Ottoman Empire and their legacies for politics in the modern Middle East.
♦ The impacts of political and economic reforms during the late Ottoman period for states in the Middle East.
♦ The role of the military in politics in the Ottoman Empire and the influence of this today.
♦ The development of colonialism and economic dependency during the late Ottoman period and how this shaped Middle Eastern interactions with the outside world.

TIMELINE

70 CE: Roman conquest of the Jewish kingdom in Palestine

325 CE: Adoption of the Nicene Creed as the official Christian profession of faith

622 CE: The Muslim community flees Mecca for Medina (*hijra*)

630 CE: The Muslim community return to Mecca

632–61: The Rashidun Caliphate (Mecca)

661–750: The Umayyad Caliphate (Damascus)

756–1031: The Umayyad Caliphate in Cordoba

750–1258: The `Abbasid Caliphate (Baghdad)

910–1171: The Fatimid Caliphate (Mahdia to 969, Cairo)

1250–1517: The Mamluk Caliphate (Baghdad)

1517–1923: The Ottoman Caliphate (Constantinople)

1536: First of the Capitulations Treaties signed between France and the Ottoman Empire

1798: Napoleon's landing in Egypt

1805–49: Muhammad `Ali's rule in Egypt

1834: Introduction of the *tanzimat* reforms

1876: Introduction of the first Ottoman constitution

1878: Suspension of the Ottoman constitution

1881: Creation of the Ottoman Public Debt Administration (OPDA)

1909: Reintroduction of the Ottoman constitution

1909–13: CUP control of Ottoman government

✦ Introduction

The pre-colonial, imperial history of the Middle East is often discounted as simply a long trajectory of decline that left the Middle East open for colonial exploitation. In contrast, this period is presented here as leaving profound legacies for the political, social and economic landscape of the region, legacies that intertwined with and often outlasted patterns of colonial rule in the modern Middle East. In particular, the slow decline of the Ottoman Empire and its efforts to resist territorial losses, economic decline, cultural malaise and the emergence of new identities and allegiances had immense impacts on the region. Through a brief overview of the people, identities and religions of the region this chapter will explore the patterns of Ottoman rule and its legacies. Understanding the legacies of the imperial era in the Middle East allows a greater comprehension of the impacts of colonialism and the formation of the state system in the region.

The Middle East in the Imperial Era

The Ottoman Empire was a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional realm. It reached its peak between the 17th and 18th centuries, during which time it developed an elaborate set of policies to manage relations between the many groups it ruled to ensure their political and economic representation, as well as to prevent challenges to its character as a Muslim Empire. This was challenging as the Empire ruled over a domain stretching throughout the Middle East, North Africa and into South-Eastern Europe. This section will outline and discuss the religious and ethnic composition of the Ottoman Empire, with a focus on the Middle East and North African territories under Ottoman rule. It will include a brief discussion of the Middle East's religious heritage as the birthplace of the three dominant monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the role of religious identity in the late Ottoman period, and the intersection of this with the emerging ideologies of ethnically based national identity.

The Middle East's Religious and Imperial Heritage

The Middle East is the birthplace of the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The common theme of monotheism, or belief in one God, along with their shared history in the Middle East, has tied these religious traditions together. They share a number of features outside this central tenet of monotheism, in particular a focus on law, social justice and eschatology (life after death). In addition, religion and religious identity have been key themes in Middle Eastern political life to today.

Judaism

The Jewish community traces its heritage to the 2nd millennium BCE. According to Jewish tradition, Abraham, as patriarch of both the Jews and Arabs, was directed by God (*yahweh*) to move from Harran in northern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) to the land of Canaan (present-day Israel/Palestine). Here, the children of Abraham's grandson Jacob would establish the 12 tribes of Israel that would form the basis of the Jewish community before, during and after its exile and return from Egypt around the mid-13th century BCE. Between the 13th and 5th centuries BCE, the Jewish community would develop the core features of the faith, characterised by a focus on law and the inviolability of the oneness of God (Bayme, 1997: 282).

In addition, the Jewish community would pass through periods of self-rule, occupation and finally conquest at the hands of the Roman Empire in the year

70 CE, and the imposition of Roman control over the former Jewish kingdom on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. From this point, the Jews became a diaspora community throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and later North America, Australia and elsewhere. This dispersal of the community would lead to the development of a range of different traditions, each of which is referential to the core tenets of the Jewish faith.

> The **People of the Book** (*ahl al-kitab*) is an Arabic term, referred to in the *Qur`an*, used to refer to the believers of the non-Muslim monotheistic faiths (Jews and Christians). The 'book' (*kitab*) is a reference to the shared tradition of reverence for revealed scripture contained within a holy text (*Torah*, *Bible*, *Qur`an*). It was a concept developed by successive Islamic empires to show preference for these communities over followers of polytheistic faiths.

Christianity

In these latter years of independent Jewish rule, Christianity emerged as the second great monotheistic faith in the Middle East. Christianity was a faith founded by Jesus of Nazareth, who was acclaimed as anointed by God by his followers as part of God's earlier covenants with the prophets Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The designation 'Christ' is a translation from the Greek *khristos* or 'annointed' and translated from the Hebrew *mashiah*. As such, Christianity, or the followers of Jesus Christ, emerged directly out of Jewish tradition and clashed with both the Jewish religious hierarchy as well as the Roman state religious doctrine of polytheism.

Here, a key difference between Judaism and Christianity is worth noting in that the former developed alongside the establishment of a political entity in the first Jewish kingdom and its successors, whilst the latter developed as a small sectarian movement with no political authority. Whilst this would change in the 4th century CE with the adoption of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine, references to specific prescriptions for political rule in Christianity are negligible compared to the elaborate legal system contained within Jewish doctrine. This would be a process formalised later with the various church councils convened by the Romans from the 4th century CE.

Islam

Indeed, the relationship between religion and politics highlights a closer connection between Judaism and the other great monotheistic faith to emerge from the Middle East, Islam. Judaism and Islam both seek to grapple directly with the issue

of temporal political authority and understand the relationship of this to spiritual authority and faith. Islam was founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE in the Hijaz, or the western Arabian Peninsula. After having developed a well-established trading network in the city of Mecca, Muhammad is said to have received direct revelation from God (*allah*) that was documented in the *Qur`an* (recitation or reading) as the direct word of God. The *Qur`an* developed over a number of years as Muhammad received more revelations. It is here that the relationship between Islam and politics began to develop through two distinct phases (Lapidus, 2002: 18–30).

THE CALIPHATES

- The Rashidun Caliphate (632–61)
- The Umayyad Caliphate (661–750)
- The Umayyad Caliphate in Cordoba (756–1031)
- The `Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258)
- The Fatimid Caliphate (910–1171)
- The Mamluk Caliphate (1250–1517)
- The Ottoman Caliphate (1517–1923)

In this first phase, Muhammad drew a small group of followers to this new faith, but also attracted the hostility of the authorities in Mecca, who saw the monotheistic message as a challenge to the dominant polytheistic practice in the region, and the themes of social justice as a challenge to their economic dominance of the region. This led to increasingly direct persecution of the community before it fled to the city of Medina in the year 622 CE. From here, Muhammad and his community grew, quickly becoming the dominant force in the city. It was during this second period that revelation and its documentation in the *Qur`an* began to deal explicitly with political matters, as it was now the governing authority of a nascent political community.

Selections from the Constitution of Medina

- They are one community (*ummah*) to the exclusion of all men.
- God's protection is one, the least of them may give protection to a stranger on their behalf. Believers are friends one to the other to the exclusion of outsiders.
- Yathrib [Medina] shall be a sanctuary for the people of this document.

(Continued)

> (Continued)
>
> ♦   If any dispute or controversy likely to cause trouble should arise it must be referred to God and to Muhammad the apostle of God.
> ♦   The Jews of al-Aus, their freed men and themselves have the same standing with the people of this document in purely loyalty from the people of this document.
>
> Guillarme, Alfred (1967) *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 231

In addition to the increasingly specific revelations regulating the politics of the Muslim community, Muhammad also developed the Constitution of Medina (*al-dustur al-madina*), an agreement between the leader of the Muslim community and all the major tribes of the city including all Muslims as well as the significant Jewish population and the polytheist community. This model sought to replace tribal ties with membership in the Islamic community (*ummah*), with concurrent equal citizenship rights; to ensure religious freedoms within the community, whilst positioning the head of the Muslim community as the head of the political community; to install a new taxation system that would alleviate social inequalities; and to allow for the accession of new groups. As such, this act and the context that it was articulated in, established a sense of unitary Islamic identity as well as a mode of Islamic governance that would incorporate a variety of other religions (Lapidus, 2002: 18–30).

> Today, it is estimated there are 1.57 billion Muslims globally, the world's second largest religion, with the vast majority of the Muslim global community living outside the Middle East and North Africa (an estimated 75% of Muslims live outside the Middle East). Of this community, the majority are of the Sunni branch of the faith (85–90%). Iran, Iraq and Bahrain have Shĩa majority communities, and there are significant Shĩa communities in Lebanon, Yemen, Kuwait and Turkey.

This was not without challenge. Indeed, a number of Jewish tribes in Medina resisted the new government, leading to an unsuccessful rebellion and their exile from the city. In addition, the dominant tribes of Mecca, concerned about the emergence of a new regional centre of authority, engaged in a series of battles with the new community between 624 and 629 CE. Ultimately, the Muslim community defeated the Meccan forces and united the tribes of the western Arabian Peninsula under the banner of Islam by the time of the Prophet's death in 632 CE.

Islamic Empires

Challenges to the rapid growth of Islam as a religion and empire across the Middle East were not exclusively external. The contested question of the succession after Muhammad led to the outbreak of civil war over the method of selecting the leader of the community. The first three successors to Muhammad, Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman, served to balance claims to succession based on political and economic ascendancy as opposed to lineage and proximity to Muhammad. These tensions broke open with the appointment of `Ali as successor (*caliph*) in 656 CE, leading to challenges from members of the formerly dominant *quraysh* tribe, members of whom had been appointed to prominent political positions across the growing Islamic empire. `Ali was assassinated in 661 CE, which saw leadership pass to Mu`awiyyah, a member of the *quraysh* and governor of the Syrian territories conquered from the Byzantines. The supporters of `Ali (*shi`atu `ali* or Shi`a) continued to rebel against this new government and were largely marginalised over the ensuing five centuries, whilst the majority of the community (calling themselves the `*ahl us-sunnah wa`l-gama`ah* or Sunni) gave their allegiance to Mu`awiyyah and the newly established Umayyad Caliphate.]

The Umayyad Caliphate, built on the conquests of the first Islamic empire and its immediate successors, had spread its rule from the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant through North Africa, Andalusia (modern-day Spain) and east to the borders of India by the mid-8th century CE. Here, the Middle East, with the exception of Byzantine-held Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) became ruled by a succession of Islamic empires until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. This saw the region's political practices, symbology, literature, art and all other fields heavily imbued with reference to Islam, even when this was not specifically referential to religion. The glories of this period, particularly the `Abbasid 'Golden Age' between the 8th and 13th centuries CE put the Middle East at the centre of technological, artistic and political advancement. Nostalgia for this period, and discussions of how the
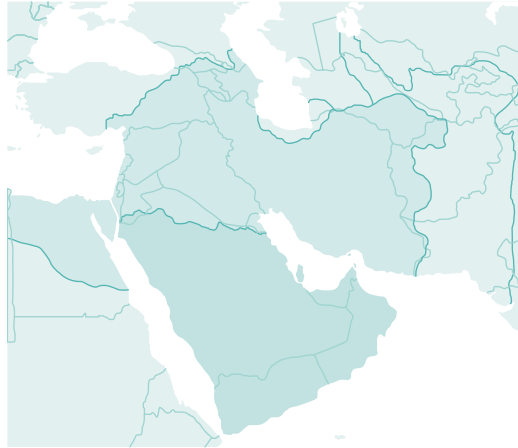

Figure 1.1 The expansion of Islamic rule in the Middle East and North Africa from the time of the Prophet Muhammad to the end of the *Umayyad* Caliphate in 750 CE

Source: Boston Public Library

Middle East and the Islamic world was challenged and increasingly dominated by the European colonial powers by the 18th and 19th centuries, is a common reference point for the emergence of modern political dialogue in the region and still shapes many discussions today (Donner in Esposito, 1999; Lapidus, 2002: 67–80).

❁ The People of the Ottoman Empire

Of the imperial rulers in the Middle East, it was the Ottomans who arguably left the most lasting political, economic and social legacy in the region. The Ottoman Empire, founded in the 14th century CE in Anatolia before the conquest of the Byzantine capital at Constantinople (renamed Istanbul) in 1453 CE, was based on the military might of the Turkish population who had migrated from Central Asia and converted to Islam from the 9th century CE. Between the 14th and 16th centuries, the Ottoman Empire expanded to control the Fertile Crescent, the Red Sea coast, the North African coast to modern-day Morocco, all of Anatolia and all of the Balkan Peninsula, famously advancing as far as Vienna twice, in 1529 and 1683 CE.

The *Millet* System

Across this vast territory, the Empire ruled over a variety of ethnic groups such as the Turks, Arabs, Tartars, Kurds, Turkomans, Berbers, Mamluks, Bosnians, Albanians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians and Georgians, amongst many others. However, religion was used as the primary tool of personal identification in the Empire. This was institutionalised in the *millet* (or *miliyet*) system.

The *millet* system established categories for the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian (including Armenian Catholic, Evangelical and Apostolic), the Syriac Orthodox and the Jewish communities alongside Muslim 'citizenship' of the Empire. Here, each community would exercise its own personal status law as administered by the relevant religious authorities. Whilst this was an exercise in promoting a sense of equality, the *millet* system contained within it an institutionalisation of preferential treatment for the Muslim citizens of the Empire until the *tanzimat* reforms of the 19th century, discussed below. Up to the *tanzimat*, all disputes between non-Muslims (*dhimmi*) and Muslims were to be administered under Muslim law, non-Muslims could not officially hold positions within the imperial government (although many non-Muslims held critical advisory roles throughout the history of the Empire), and non-Muslims had to pay a tax, the *čizya*.

Somewhat ironically, for the bulk of its history the Ottoman Empire had a minority Muslim population. Until the loss of the majority of its European territories in the 19th century, the population of the Empire peaked at over 70 million inhabitants,

with an estimated 40 million members of the various non-Muslim *millets*. On the eve of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and after the bulk of its European and North African territories had been excised by the European powers, the population stood at an estimated 20 million. Of this, an estimated 15 million, or 75% were Muslim; 1.8 million, or 9% were Greek Orthodox; 1.3 million, or 7% were Armenian; 190,000, or 1% were Jewish; with the remainder comprising a range of smaller groups, largely members of Eastern Christian churches (Lapidus, 2002: 265).

> The term **millet** comes from the Arabic *millah* (community). The enshrinement of religious identification as the source of personal law has its roots in pre-Ottoman imperial rule, but was formalised during the *tanzimat* reform period (1839–76). Until the rise of 'Ottomanism' during the 19th century and efforts to formalise equality for all members of the Empire, the *millet* system worked to both protect religious identity and enshrine Muslim predominance.
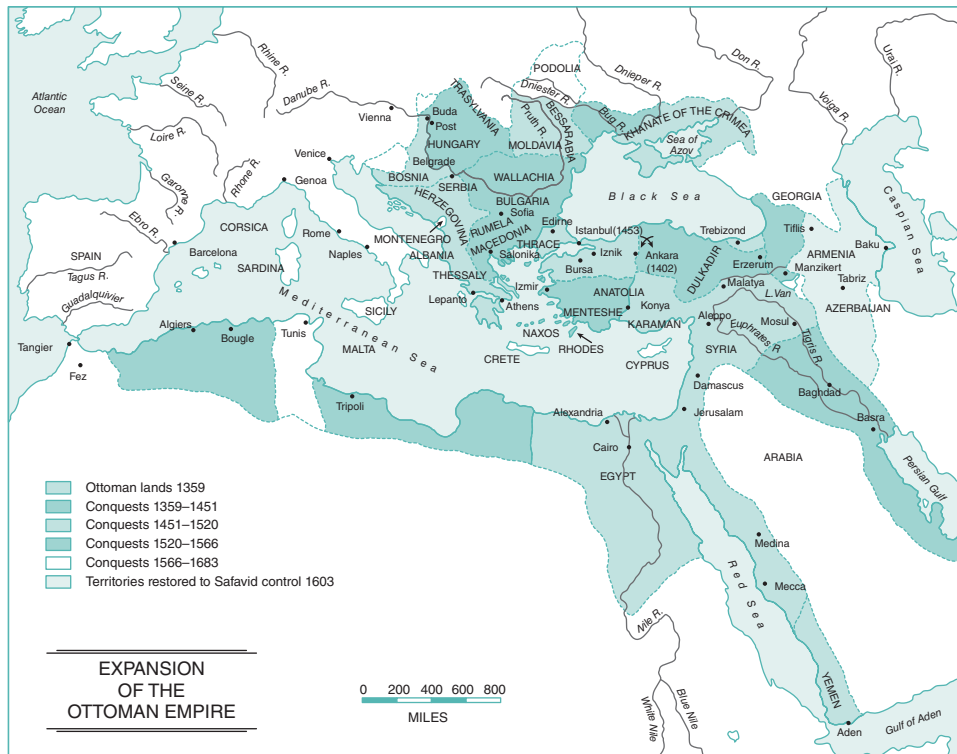

Figure 1.2 Expansion of the Ottoman Empire, 14th to 17th centuries CE
Source: Naqshbandi.org