

Political dynamics in the MENA region

Democracy, authoritarianism, and history

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LOCATING THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

A classic Arabic proverb holds that forgetfulness is the plague of knowledge. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), global audiences do not merely forget so much as exhibit chronic amnesia when stumbling across politics throughout the region. Breaking developments in these countries – policies, elections, protests, conflict, governance, revolution – frequently interrupt global headlines. Yet instead of unpacking these events in the same way as we might when discussing, say, American presidential elections or Brexit in the United Kingdom, observers too often fall back upon familiar tropes of an exotic Orient whose political dramas forever appear mysterious and irrational, given as they seemingly are waged by bearded sultans and veiled women speaking incomprehensible tongues. The poster depicted in Photo 1.1, for instance, nicely captures all the other iconic stereotypes associated with the region: the musical oud, the hookah pipe, prayer beads, palm trees, flying carpets, camels, pyramids, the Qur'an, mosques, tea kettles, crossed swords, and the Islamic crescent.

**PHOTO 1.1**

Popular images of the MENA region.

Source: iStock

To be sure, these are not fanciful inventions. They are cultural notions that can be physically located by casual visitors to the Arab world. (Except, perhaps, for the flying carpet.) The problem is when the imagery of such convenient symbols takes the place of gritty, concrete, and objective *knowledge* about political life – awareness gained only by discarding assumptions and biases about how people in the MENA behave, and instead matter-of-factly dissecting the institutions, policies, and personalities of each country on their own terms.

This book does just that, and therefore seeks to staunch the plague of forgetfulness. It makes the MENA *knowable* under the uncontroversial assumption that though politics is shaped by local circumstances, it expresses universal patterns of human behavior that can be studied and analyzed. As political scientist Harold Laswell memorably observed nearly a century ago, politics is the study of “who gets what, when, how.” How individuals and groups interact, bargain, and struggle over the allocation of power and resources through the craft of governance therefore marks our imperative. The contributors in this volume take this charge seriously, and present an impressive corpus of political knowledge about the Arab world, Iran, Turkey, and Israel that, collected over many years through focused research and frequent travel, reveals the connections between the historical past, present circumstances, and future pathways.

At the same time, this exploration shows that the MENA is no monolith. This is a critical region at the crossroads of three continents, and includes nearly two dozen states and various stateless peoples. It is also a region of *opposites*. In the last decade alone, there have been both inspiring revolutions for democracy and brutal counterrevolutionary repression inflicted by dictators. Both republics (some elected, most not) and ruling monarchies – that rarest of regime types – occupy the reins of national power. Several states like Yemen and Libya have all but collapsed due to violence and war, while others like Morocco and Kuwait seem to embody resilience and stability. Extreme wealth and opulence flourish in some hydrocarbon-exporting Gulf states, like Qatar; not far away are humanitarian crises and grotesque poverty. Some countries like Jordan remain tenaciously pro-Western in their foreign policy, while others like Syria and Iran resist Western entreaties and hegemony. In many societies, a vibrant youth generation aspires for entrepreneurship and innovation, even as elderly norms and religious dictates impose conservatism and tradition. Some travelers to the region see a fantasy land where flying carpets, belly dancers, and bellowing mosques should thrive; others see Facebook groups, Twitter hashtags, and McDonald’s in Mecca.

Understanding these politics requires drawing upon political science and international affairs, but all the contributors also incorporate insights from other disciplines as well, including history, anthropology, economics, sociology, and religion. To that end, this first chapter provides a broad overview of the MENA’s regimes, parsing out the different types of institutions and structures that characterize political order. The next chapter takes a different approach and analyzes how structural forces – such as geographic

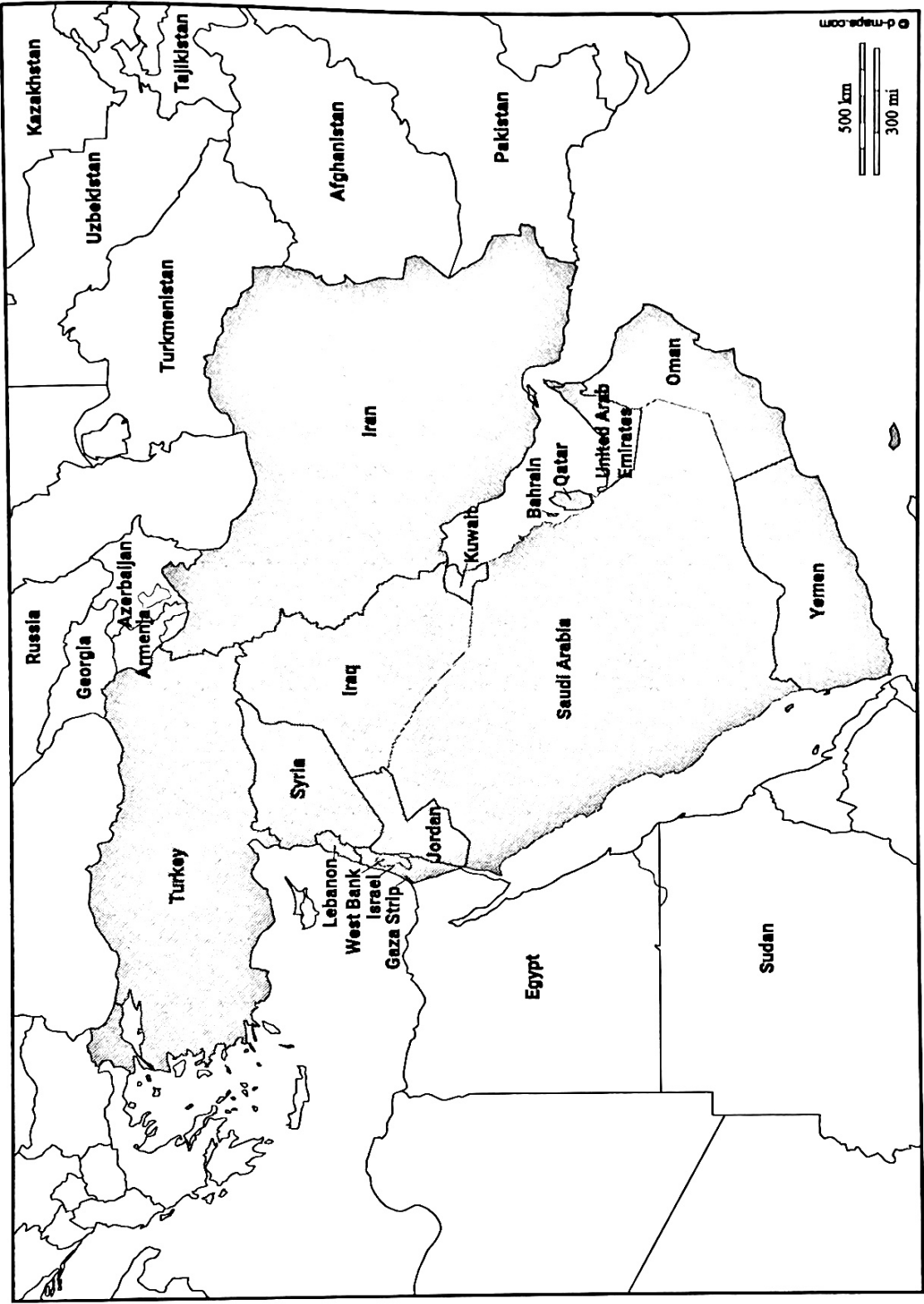
constraints, cultural change, religious identity, gender roles, and economic development – also shape the social arena of politics. A thicker and richer version of this framework of understanding *societies* rather than government and politics also occupies this book's sister volume.¹

The book proceeds simply. Every chapter beyond the first two explores a different country as a case study, including the still-stateless Palestine. Each follows an identical format. Authors provide the historical background, then social and economic context, next ruling political structures as well as the latest dynamics and events, afterwards the nature of foreign policy, and finally the outlook for the future. The arc of analysis is linear, moving from past to present to future, and each stage requires careful reading, detailed attention, and an open mind.

As a result, this book fulfills three goals. First, by delivering critical information about different countries in a consistent format, it makes a perplexing region more concrete, empirical, and knowable through the universal language of politics. It seeks to create familiarity from which expertise and knowledge flow. Second, it illuminates the diversity of the MENA countries. Far from a homogenous region, the MENA is a mosaic, and one can spend a lifetime studying its politics, as indeed the contributing authors have. Third, this volume accentuates the pace of large-scale change. For many readers, the cataclysmic ruptures and defining ideologies of yesteryear – anti-colonial movements, Arab Nationalism, communism and the Cold War, Arab-Israeli wars, the genesis of Islamism, the US-led invasions of Iraq – are emblazoned in history books rather than living memory. Yet for generations, events like these defined the politics of the Middle East and North Africa. Today, even the Arab Spring, the 2011–12 wave of regional uprisings that many likened to the 1989 Velvet Revolutions in Europe that helped end the Cold War, is fading into the backdrop. The rhythms of political transformation march on, and knowing them intimately must be a priority.

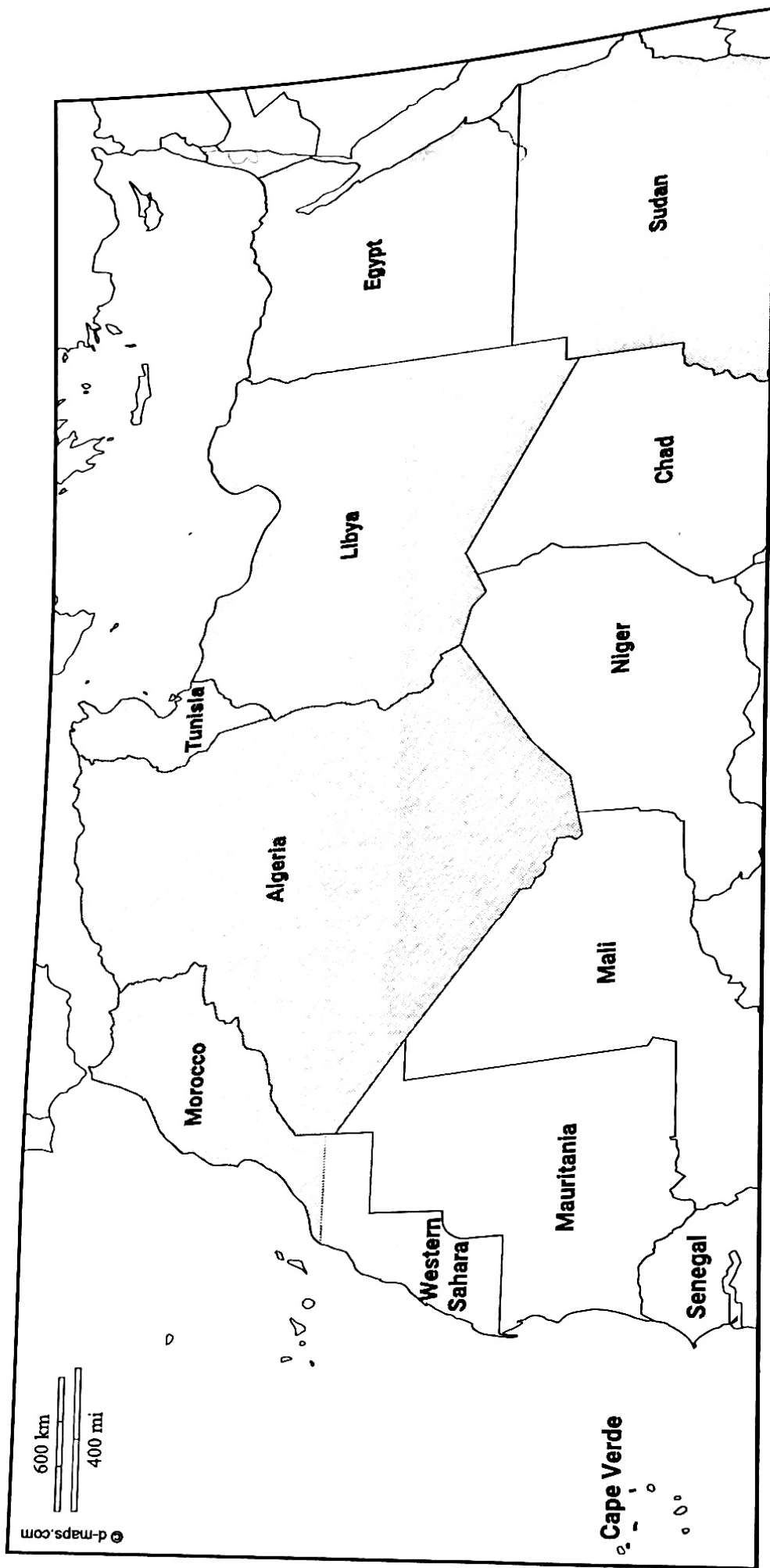
Where is the MENA? Maps 1.1 and 1.2 graphically depict this region, broken into two maps given its vast size. The entire region covers many countries at the intersection of Europe, Africa, and Asia.

The phrase “Middle East” has Western origins: it was invented as a geopolitical moniker by British and American strategists in the early twentieth century to describe the eastern area of the world distinctive from the “Far East” (i.e., China and other Asian countries on the Pacific Ocean). Traditionally, this meant the geographic region bounded in the north by Turkey, in the east by Iran, in the south by Yemen, and in the west by Egypt and the



MAP 1.1
North Africa.

Source: adapted from D-Maps by Titanilla Panczel



MAP 1.2
Near East and Arabian Peninsula.

Source: adapted from D-Maps by Titanilla Panczel

Red Sea. Today, the term “Middle East” or “Mideast” is frequently used by Westerners as a synonym to mean the entire Arab world, meaning not just this area but also all of North Africa, plus the three non-Arab countries of Israel, Turkey, and Iran.

That this wide-ranging area is now known by artificial nomenclature concocted by Anglo-American military elites hints at the enormous influence the West has played in shaping regional politics over the past century. This region lies in the middle part of the exotic East only from the Western imagination; from the perspective of, say, Japan or India, it could well be called the *Middle West*. Further, only in the past several decades have Arabic media begun using the literal translation of Middle East, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, as an idiom for the region. For centuries, Arab geographers referred to the Arabic-speaking lands as *al-‘Alam al-‘Arabi*, or the Arab world. Likewise, until 1935 Iran was called Persia, while the main land area of Turkey is still known as Asia Minor or Anatolia. In this book, for the sake of simplicity, “Middle East” and MENA are used interchangeably to refer to the entire region depicted in Maps 1.1 and 1.2, that is, the Arab countries plus Israel, Iran, and Turkey. However, it is also fruitful to envisage the MENA as consisting of three subregions, each with its own distinctive geographic terminology: North Africa, the Near East, and Arabian (or Persian) Gulf.²

First, North Africa stretches across the uppermost zone of the African continent and includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania, Egypt, and Sudan. While Mauritania and Sudan are not covered in this edition, they represent indelible parts of this subregion and the Arab world. Of the remainder, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya share the closest social, cultural, and historical ties with one another. In Arabic, these four countries are called the *Maghrib*, which means literally “sunset” and figuratively “west.” Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia are often clustered together given their common French colonial past and post-colonial relations with France, which remains the most important external actor in this neighborhood.

Second, the Near East (a customary term used early on as synonym with Middle East) includes the lands east of North Africa but north of the Arabian (also known as the Persian) Gulf. This includes Israel, Palestine (i.e., the Palestinian territories, or the West Bank and Gaza Strip), Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and non-Arab Turkey. Mirroring the *Maghrib*, this subregion is known in Arabic as the *Mashriq*, which translates as “sunrise,” or “east.” Much of this area is also colloquially known as the Levant, a French-derived term that signifies a shared cultural and historical heritage since antiquity.

Turkey possesses its own civilizational heritage, and as a non-Arab country has its own unique trajectory of political development.

Finally, the Arabian Gulf touches Iran and all the countries in the Arabian Peninsula, which encompasses Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen. Also known as the Gulf states, these Arabian countries traditionally incubated close tribal and social bonds by virtue of their collective proximity. In Arabic media, they are termed the *Khalij* (literally, "gulf"). Though frequently classified as part of this subregion given its location, Iran is not an Arab country. The country, formerly known as Persia carries its own storied identity and ancient past, including a lineage replete with empires and a political system unlike any other today.

Demographically, as Table 1.1 shows, the MENA countries wildly vary. National populations range from just a few million residents in tiny principalities like Bahrain and Qatar to closer to 100 million as in Egypt and Iran. Most are urbanized, although Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Iran still have significant rural populations. Population density, measured as inhabitants per square kilometer, also varies; compare sparsely settled countries like Oman or Libya (3.6 persons per square kilometer) to extremely crowded places like the Palestinian territories, or Bahrain (1,918.5 persons per square kilometer). Most societies have experienced strong populational growth in recent decades, although birth rates have gradually declined. Syria has notably witnessed populational decline due to the flow of refugees outwards. The sources of demographic growth vary elsewhere; some countries have slightly higher birth rates, such as Egypt and Oman; some have seen enormous immigration by foreign workers (e.g., Kuwait, UAE); and some have received refugees fleeing conflicts like Syria (e.g., Jordan, Lebanon). The last column reveals an important but dreadful figure, the number of refugees living in the territory from other countries. Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and the Palestinian territories have the highest refugee populations, followed by Sudan and Iran. The Palestinian territories (in particular, the West Bank) represent a special case, as most refugees there are Palestinians who have held refugee status for many decades due to displacement from past Arab-Israeli conflicts.

TABLE 1.1**Demographics of the MENA, 2019**

	Total population	Population density (per sq. km)	Urban population (% total population)	Population growth rate (annual)	Refugee population
Algeria	41,318,142	17.3	72.1	1.7	94,128
Bahrain	1,492,584	1,918.5	89.2	4.6	**
Egypt	97,553,151	98	42.7	1.9	232,617
Iran	81,162,788	49.83	74.4	1.1	979,435
Iraq	38,274,618	88.16	70.3	2.8	277,663
Israel	8,713,300	402.7	92.3	1.9	25,637
Jordan	9,702,353	109.3	90.8	2.6	2,896,162
Kuwait	4,136,528	232.1	100	2.1	**
Lebanon	6,082,357	594.6	88.4	1.3	1,468,137
Libya	6,374,616	3.6	79.8	1.3	9,342
Morocco	35,739,580	808	61.9	1.3	4,678
Oman	4,636,262	15	83.6	4.7	**
Palestine (West Bank & Gaza Strip)	4,684,777	778.2	75.9	2.9	2,213,963
Qatar	2,639,211	227.3	99.1	2.7	**
Saudi Arabia	32,938,213	15.3	83.6	2	**
Sudan	40,533,330	23.3	34.4	2.4	906,585
Syria	18,269,868	99.5	53.5	-0.9	N/A
Tunisia	11,532,127	74.2	68.6	1.1	**
Turkey	80,745,020	104.9	74.6	1.5	3,480,310
UAE	9,400,145	132.4	86.2	1.4	**
Yemen	28,250,420	53.5	36	2.4	270,898

Sources: World Bank (2019), *World Development Indicators*.

** denotes under 1,000 refugees.

Note: Refugees are those forcibly displaced from their home territories or countries who are either recognized in accordance with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or granted refugee-like humanitarian protections and rights by their host territory or country.

UNDERSTANDING POLITICS: STATES, REGIMES, AND FOREIGN POLICY

The study of politics rests upon several foundational concepts. *States* are mostly synonymous with countries in common parlance, but in social science the term taps a deeper concept. In the classic Weberian definition, the modern state is an organized political community that possesses a monopoly over the legitimate use of coercion and commands sovereignty within a finite territorial space. That monopoly means that only the state can serve as ultimate arbiter over life and death within the population: no entity except the government can raise an army, make laws, close borders, execute persons, and commit other acts requiring force or violence. Sovereignty implies exclusive authority. States are sovereign insofar that within their boundaries, only they determine political and legal structures of authority, regulate social and economic relations (such as taxation), and formulate foreign policy toward other states. In theory, all modern states have the right of sovereignty; in practice, sovereignties are frequently violated by global powers in acts ranging from invasions and interventions to diplomacy and sanctions. Still, we distinguish modern states from old colonies or protectorates, as the MENA was prior to the 1950s, in that the former at least have a recognized expectation for sovereignty.

Every sovereign state has a government or *regime*, defined as the institutions and rules that determine access to key offices of state power. Many ways to classify regimes exist, but here the most convenient is through three categories: democratic, authoritarian, and hybrid.

- a. *Democratic* regimes allow for free, fair, and regular elections with full adult suffrage. Those elections determine those who will occupy offices of legislative and executive power, and thus who makes policies. These regimes also promise the protection of civil liberties – such as religious, expressive, and press freedoms – under the rule of law. In addition, there must not be any unelected tutelary body, such as generals, priests, and kings, who can overturn the decisions of elected officials. Ideally, there is also accountability and transparency; citizens can redress their grievances through the judiciary and other constitutional mechanisms, and also hold their leaders responsible for abuses of power, such as corruption and other illegal actions.
- b. *Authoritarian* regimes, also deemed autocracies or dictatorships, lack meaningful competition for power. For the typical citizen, elections do not exist, or else are so restricted that the incumbent leader or ruling party always wins. There does not exist any uncertainty about who will

govern. Unlike democracies, opposition is banned outright or severely curtailed through repression. Elected bodies like symbolic legislatures and advisory councils do not have autonomy compared to the ruler – the president-for-life sitting astride a ruling party, the military general leading the *junta*, or the absolutist monarch who actively decides. Civic freedoms are restricted, minority rights are unprotected, and the threat of violence contains societal pluralism.

- c. *Hybrid* regimes constitute a gray zone, and are also called competitive autocracies (or semi-democracies). Such governments combine institutional qualities of democracies and authoritarianism, making it difficult to put these cases squarely in either camp. Electoral contestation, legal opposition, and civic freedoms are ensured by law; there is no ironclad dictator ruling by repression. That said, the playing field of competition is grossly unfair due to rules that favor some powerholders and prevent the public from expressing its preferences. For instance, state violence can hamper citizens from participation; periodic elections are postponed or manipulated; civil society and the media face limitations; and judiciaries side with the executive to stifle change.

Democracies, autocracies, and hybrid regimes vary across one common institutional dimension – the structure of executive power, or who commands supreme authority. Most countries in the world today are *republics*, where the heads of government are public officials chosen by society to rule according to a constitution. In *parliamentary republics*, an elected legislature chooses a cabinet-based government whose head (i.e., prime minister, premier, or chancellor) is held accountable. The executive and legislative branches are interdependent. In some cases, a ceremonial president may represent the nation to the outside world as head of state (that is, the figurative embodiment of the country's sovereignty), but has little internal weight. In *presidential republics*, the head of government and head of state is the same figure – the president, who is directly elected to office rather than chosen by legislative results. The president wields the preponderance of power. The legislature is institutionally separate, but serves to check and balance the executive, as in the United States. Finally, some republics have popularly elected presidents who, as head of state, share policymaking powers in a compromise with governments led by a prime minister, the head of government. Presidents are usually the stronger actor in these *semi-presidential* systems, but not always. Table 1.2 shows how regime types and structures of executive power interactively align in MENA countries.

TABLE 1.2**Political regimes and power structures, 2019**

	Year of independence	Current constitution, year adopted	Regime type	Power structure	National elections
Algeria	1962	1989 (last amended 2016)	Authoritarian	Republic (semi-presidential)	Parliamentary (every 5 years); presidential (every 5 years)
Bahrain	1971	2002 (last amended 2017)	Authoritarian	Monarchy	Parliamentary (every 4 years)
Egypt	1922	2014	Authoritarian	Republic (presidential)	Parliamentary (every 5 years); presidential (every 4 years)
Iran	1946	1979 (last amended 1989)	Authoritarian	Republic (theocratic)	Parliamentary (every 4 years); presidential (every 4 years)
Iraq	1932	2005	Hybrid	Republic (parliamentary)	Parliamentary (every 4 years); presidential (every 4 years)
Israel	1948	None (Basic Law established 1958)	Democratic	Republic (parliamentary)	Parliamentary (every 4 years); presidential (every 7 years)
Jordan	1946	1952 (last amended 2016)	Authoritarian	Monarchy	Parliamentary (every 4 years)
Kuwait	1961	1962	Authoritarian	Monarchy	Parliamentary (every 4 years)
Lebanon	1943	1926 (last amended 2004)	Hybrid	Republic (semi-presidential)	Parliamentary (every 4 years); presidential (every 6 years)

(Continued)

Libya	1951	2011 (last amended 2012)	Hybrid**	Republic (parliamentary)**	Parliamentary (electoral term unspecified)**
Morocco	1956	1962 (last amended 2011)	Authoritarian	Monarchy	Parliamentary (every 5 years)
Oman	1951	1996 (last amended 2011)	Authoritarian	Monarchy	Parliamentary (every 4 years)
Palestine (West Bank & Gaza Strip)	Not Independent	None (Basic Law established in 2002)	Hybrid	Republic (semi-presidential)	Parliamentary (every 4 years); presidential (every 4 years)
Qatar	1971	2004	Authoritarian	Monarchy	Advisory assembly (as of 2019, never held)
Saudi Arabia	1932	1992 (last amended 2013)	Authoritarian	Monarchy	None
Sudan	1956	2005	Authoritarian	Republic (presidential)	Parliamentary (every 6 years); presidential (every 5 years)
Syria	1946	1973 (last amended 2012)	Authoritarian	Republic (presidential)	Parliamentary (every 4 years); presidential (every 7 years)
Tunisia	1956	2014	Democratic	Republic (semi-presidential)	Parliamentary (every 5 years); presidential (every 5 years)
Turkey	1923	1982 (last amended 2017)	Democratic	Republic (presidential)	Parliamentary (every 4 years); presidential (every 5 years)
UAE	1971	1971 (last amended 2009)	Authoritarian	Monarchy (federal)	Advisory assembly (every 4 years)

(Continued)

	Year of independence	Current constitution, year adopted	Regime type	Power structure	National elections
Yemen	1918 (North), 1967 (South)	1991 (last amended 2001; new constitution proposed in 2015)	Authoritarian**	Republic (presidential)**	Parliamentary (every 6 years); presidential (every 7 years)**

Note: Iran's British and Russian occupation ended in 1946, but it was never officially a colony or protectorate. Sudan's ongoing instability has removed its presidency, and in early 2019 installed a military council in its place.

** denotes situations of ongoing civil conflict throughout 2018–19, leaving future of executive power structure and elections unknown.

Foreign policy

Regardless of regime type, most governments today make decisions that not only shape their national societies, but also affect their relations with the regimes and governments inhabiting external states. Thus, we must understand not just domestic politics but also *foreign policy*. Foreign policy means the choices, strategies, and goals chosen by state leaders to achieve their goals vis-à-vis other states. The realm of foreign policy analysis is replete with important puzzles and newsworthy events to decipher: why, for instance, did Egypt make peace with Israel in 1978? Why did Iraq invade Kuwait in 1990? Why did Saudi Arabia intervene to suppress Bahrain's revolution in 2011? Why are some MENA regimes pro-Western and others antagonistic to Western interests? In sum, what determines how much a regime will decide to trade, invest, negotiate, engage, ignore, embrace, betray, or ally with its neighbors?

MENA regimes are no different than governments elsewhere in that their foreign policies firstly aim to perpetuate their survival and protect their core interests. Beyond that, foreign policies project their long-term objectives and values in ways that should enhance their reputation and security. As such, foreign policies typically originate from several sources. First, domestically, national constituencies, supporters, and groups within a country favor certain initiatives because it would benefit them. In this theoretical lens, the international behavior of states and regimes comes from the constraints and challenges that rulers face in governing at home. While such a lesson applies clearly to democracies – American presidents, after all, frequently campaign for votes with foreign policy promises, such as less interventionism or more

human rights protections – it also applies to autocracies. Dictators cannot rule by force alone, and they need at least some coalition of supporters to legitimate and back their rule. The preferences of those domestic players may well diverge from their own interests, requiring some sort of compromise or adjustment that eventually is expressed in foreign policy. For instance, business moguls may desire for their king or lifelong president to make peace and strike trade deals with former enemies because it would mean greater profits and wealth.

Regionally, leaders also interact with one another within fixed patterns of conflict and cooperation. Most global regions constitute what political scientists call “sub-systems” within the broader international system, which are regulated by particular hierarchies and relationships. Often, regional sub-systems revolve around a major power that creates implicit rules of engagement and polices other countries by virtue of their larger size, economy, or military. In East Asia, for example, China plays this role. In other cases, regional sub-systems can feature recurrent types of conflict, often driven by the intervention of global actors that seek to dominate the region – a scenario the MENA matches. At the same time, the MENA sub-system has its own peculiar features, among them regional organizations like the Arab League, which since its 1945 founding has attempted to foster cooperation and unity among its members. In the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf Cooperation Council since 1981 has served as a weak security and economic alliance, although in the late 2010s it has become paralyzed with internal rifts. Intra-MENA geopolitics also have visible cleavages between regional powers that stem from conflicting interests and ambitions to dominate the regional space, such as the ongoing Saudi-Iranian rivalry, which has forced virtually all states to pick a side as part of their foreign policy.

Finally, internationally, regimes must also navigate their external relations under the constraints imposed by global rules and powerful actors, who may reward or restrict certain behaviors. In developing regions like the MENA, most countries have interacted with the global system under conditions of absolute asymmetry, meaning they have far less autonomy to select new policies than the handful of countries that stand as hegemons. Since the 1990s, for instance, the United States has interacted with Arab states and Iran with the assumption that only the US has the will and capacity to strategically intervene into the domestic affairs of these regions, and sanction or destroy perceived threats; there is no equivalent reciprocal threat that can be made back. Multilateral institutions like the United Nations also operate in the transnational realm, requiring countries to make important decisions

regarding their stances and alliances. Globalization also presents a pivotal milieu: whether or not a country chooses to lower trade barriers, end old conflicts, and raise its visibility can reflect structural incentives to better integrate into the global economy and reap its networks of transnational finance, investments, and cultural flows.

To all these causes of foreign policymaking must be added one additional factor; namely the idiosyncratic logic of national leaders. Sometimes, foreign policy may stem not from any domestic, regional, or international factor but instead the particular beliefs of the president or king. For example, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 may well have sprung from its authoritarian regime's desire for greater oil resources and to capture regional prestige. Or, it could have expressed the wildly grandiose aspirations of Saddam Hussein, who fancied himself as a pan-Arab leader who could unite the Arab world under a new, singular banner of anti-Western resistance. No matter the cause, foreign policy remains an integral component of every political system.

Democratic regimes

In the post-colonial era, democracy has been scarce in the MENA. Table 1.3 reveals Freedom House scores for political rights at five-year intervals from 1976 through 2018. While no quantitative metric is perfect, Freedom House's index helps capture long-term regime trends by taking into account the regularity and fairness of elections, the scope of opposition toleration and legality, and the effective functioning of government institutions. The scale runs from 1 through 7, and lower is better: scores from 3 to 1 denote democracies of improving quality, while 4 and above identify hybrid regimes and, near the maximum of 7, the most closed dictatorships. The table shows that Israel has consistently qualified as democratic, while Turkey has varied over time due to military coups and, today, overstepping by the government. It also conveys how the Arab Spring's success in Tunisia remarkably changed its political system, as its score has rapidly improved since the pre-2011 years. Minor variations over the decades in countries like Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Kuwait reflect periodic reforms that temporarily allow for greater individual freedom but ensure unelected rulers hoard power. Long periods of torpor also characterize the most closed dictatorships, such as Libya until the Arab Spring, Iraq under Saddam, and Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Syria for decades; in such cases, there are few to no real improvements to the state of political rights, competition, and pluralism.

TABLE 1.3**Average Freedom House scores of political rights, 1973–2018**

	1976– 1980	1981– 1985	1986– 1990	1991– 1995	1996– 2000	2001– 2005	2006– 2010	2011– 2015	2016– 2018
Algeria	6	6	5.4	6.2	6	6	6	6	6
Bahrain	5.6	5	5.4	6	7	5.2	5.4	6.2	7
Egypt	5	4.5	5	5.6	6	6	6	5.8	6
Iran	5.4	5.5	5.4	6	6	6	6	6	6
Iraq	6.8	6.5	7	7	7	6.8	5.6	5.4	5
Israel	2	2	2	1.4	1	1	1	1	1
Jordan	6	5.5	5.2	3.8	4	5.2	5.4	6	5.3
Kuwait	6	4	6.2	5.2	4.6	4	4	4.6	5
Lebanon	4	5	5.8	5.8	6	5.8	5	5	5.3
Libya	6.2	6	6.4	7	7	7	7	5.6	6.7
Morocco	3.8	4	4	5.2	5	5	5	5	5
Oman	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
Palestine (West Bank & Gaza Strip)	5	5	5.4	6	5	5	5.2	6.2	6.5
Qatar	5	5	5.8	7	6.6	6	6	6	6
Saudi Arabia	6	6	6.4	7	7	7	7	7	7
Sudan	5.4	5.2	5.8	7	7	7	7	7	7
Syria	5.2	6	6.4	7	7	7	7	7	7
Tunisia	6	5	5.4	5.8	6	6	6.8	3.4	1.3
Turkey	2.6	3.75	2.4	3.6	4	3.2	3	3	4
UAE	5	5	5.4	6.2	6	6	6	6	6.3
Yemen	6.2	5.75	5.8	5.2	5	5.4	5.4	6	7

Source: Freedom House (2019), *Freedom in the World*. 1 = most free (e.g., liberal democracies); 7 = least free (e.g., closed dictatorships).

Note: Data for Palestinian territories begin in 1978. Yemen data from 1976 through 1989 is average of North and South Yemen.

Had Libya held together after the Arab Spring, it might well be considered democratic today, as it held early elections and began crafting a new constitutional framework before institutional rules collapsed and internal wrangling deepened. Egypt also experienced a brief window of democracy after 2011, until the July 2013 military coup implanted a new authoritarian regime. Given the brevity of these post-revolutionary experiments, the list of stable MENA democracies is few. Israel is a parliamentary republic led by a prime minister chosen by its legislature, the Knesset. Tunisia's post-Arab Spring political arena abides by a semi-presidential system that balances duties between a president and premier, the latter of whom is chosen by a capable parliament. Turkey featured various types of parliamentary republicanism until 2018, when it shifted to a presidential republic with a greatly weakened legislature. These countries present meaningful elections and civic freedoms, although they are not perfect. Grappling still with unresolved issues of religious and national identity, Israel's laws continue to discriminate against Arab citizens. Tunisia's young democracy has balanced power between Islamists and secularist parties, but its liberal constitution continues to be tested by local unrest and corruption. Turkish politics allows for regular multiparty competition, although increased suppression of dissent under the ruling Justice and Development Party and its long-serving leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has introduced authoritarian tendencies.

What explains the paucity of democracy in the Arab world and Iran? Arguments that Islam encourages despotism are ethnocentric and misleading, not least because the world's largest Muslim-majority country and third largest democracy is Indonesia. Further, polling organizations like the Pew Research Center and Arab Barometer consistently show that the vast majority of Muslims prefer democracy regardless of their religiosity – something also confirmed by the Arab Spring protests, which demanded freedom, voice, and above all elections. In truth, the longevity of authoritarianism has little to do with any alleged cultural barrier, and instead reflects matter-of-factly the strategies and techniques that autocratic rulers exploit to survive. Among these are institutions calibrated to squelch opposition, widespread intimidation and violence, adroit redistribution of oil wealth, and geopolitical support from global powers prioritizing stability over the uncertainty of democratic change.

Authoritarianism: the republics

Within the camp of authoritarianism, republics in Algeria, Egypt, Syria, and Sudan have historically revolved around dominant presidential figures. Prior

to 2003, Iraq fell into this category; before the Arab Spring, so did Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya. In such systems, parliaments cannot curb the executive and its control over the coercive apparatus, including the security services and the army. Some dictators inherit power. In Syria, Bashar al-Asad came to power in 1999 after the death of his father, Hafiz. Others seize power through coups, as Muammar al-Qaddafi did in Libya in 1969. Once ensconced, however, they do not leave quietly. Most refuse to hold meaningful elections, and instead only offer half-hearted plebiscites (as in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Tunisia for decades) or else sabotage ballot boxes with such grotesque fraudulence and repression that the decimated opposition has no credible chance of winning. Former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak swept his reelection in 2005 with nearly 90 percent of the vote, for instance, while in 1999, Ali Abdallah Salih of Yemen retained power with over 96 percent of all ballots. In 2007, Bashar Al-Asad was “re-elected” with a 99.8 percent margin of victory; in the purportedly more competitive 2014 elections, he still garnered nearly 90 percent.

Iran’s Islamic Republic, the product of its 1979 revolution, represents a special case of theocratic presidentialism. The Iranian constitution allows for competitive parliamentary and presidential elections that often shows spirited contestation, but such contests are overshadowed by the tutelary power of Shi’a jurists who can screen candidates, dismiss the president, and, above all, select the *rahbar* (supreme leader) – the highest political and religious authority in the land. This dualistic system ensures that even if opposition forces win elections, unelected religious authorities keep superlative power to control the state and veto unwanted policies.

Two institutions secure republican dictatorships: hegemonic political parties and the coercive apparatus. In the post-colonial Arab countries, most presidential dictators headed party organizations that descended from the leftist and nationalist movements of the 1950s and 1960s. On paper, these parties existed to mobilize voters for elections, but as elections had little import, they supported the leadership in other ways. Ruling parties rallied popular opinion, unified bickering elites, and distributed patronage to supporters. For instance, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia ruled for more than two decades through the Democratic Constitutional Rally, which had dominated politics under different names since the 1950s. After its rise, the Ba’th Party became deeply incorporated into Iraqi and Syrian state institutions, and helped burnish the long tenures of Saddam Hussein and Hafiz al-Asad. In Algeria, similarly, the National Liberation Front was the only party allowed until 1989, and all top political officials hailed from its ranks.

In most authoritarian MENA states (including the monarchies), the coercive apparatus serves as the linchpin. Its most visible manifestations are the intelligence services and the armed forces. The intelligence services (in Arabic, *mukhabarat*) operate to eliminate political threats through surveillance and intimidation at all levels – within universities, businesses, clubs, homes, even ruling parties. Not all methods are overtly violent; detention, harassment, and legal prosecution often prove sufficient to suffocate troublesome critics, such as human rights activists, religious groups, and trade unions. However, they are not invulnerable. Even the most rapacious intelligence and police forces can be overwhelmed by mass spontaneous revolts driven by citizens who no longer fear repression, as the Arab Spring showed. In addition, the military also plays an integral role in some republics. Inspired by Turkey's Kemalist ideology, many militaries in post-colonial Arab countries saw themselves as guardians of the state and hence above all reproach. That praetorian mentality meant that many presidents would come from military ranks, most famously Nasser of Egypt. Other officers-turned-leaders include al-Qaddafi of Libya, Salih of Yemen, Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hafiz al-Asad of Syria, and Mubarak of Egypt. The current Egyptian president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, is a former army general.

For this reason, most Arab militaries enjoy special privileges and big budgets. Tunisia under Ben Ali during 1987–2011 was a rare exception, as he relied more upon the intelligence services rather than the army for support – a preference that ultimately cost him dearly, as the military sided with protesters during the successful 2011 Jasmine Revolution. Closer to the norm are Algeria and Egypt, where the armed forces enjoy a huge independent domain of economic interests and institutional clout. When necessary, they can crack down upon large-scale threats. During its civil conflict in the 1990s, the Algerian military waged unending operations against Islamist militants, with nearly 150,000 perishing in the violence. In Syria, the military besieged the town of Hama in 1982 to dismantle the Muslim Brotherhood, killing 10,000; today, its tenacious loyalty and international support has helped keep the Asad regime in power despite the state of devastation in Syria. Most recently in Egypt, the army under President Sisi helped liquidate the Muslim Brotherhood after overthrowing the elected Islamist government in 2013, with the resulting unrest killing thousands of protesters.

Authoritarianism: ruling monarchies

Eight of the Arab countries feature monarchical regimes. Around the world, most monarchies are constitutionalized because the royal head of state reigns

but does not rule, as in Spain or Japan. In the MENA, however, monarchies still reign *and* rule. In such systems, while there may be an elected parliament with a cabinet-based government led by a prime minister, the royal head (e.g., king, emir, sultan) holds almost all executive authority and can promulgate laws by decree. Moreover, royal authority is inherited through dynastic succession within the family, not contested by the public through elections. Abdication is rare, with one example coming from Qatar's al-Thani dynasty in 2013, when Emir Hamad vacated power in favor of his son, Crown Prince Tamim bin Hamad. Otherwise, succession lines are agnatic (i.e., based upon the male line) but vary in terms of which familial branches are favored. In Saudi Arabia, the throne has circulated among the elderly sons of the kingdom's founder, 'Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, since his death in 1953; only after the passing of the current ruler, the ailing King Salman, will power pass to the next generation – most likely the current Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the king's son. In Oman, Sultan Qabus captured his position in 1970 from his father, Sultan Sa'id bin Taimur. More familiar to Western audiences are succession lines in which the crown passes from father to son. King Muhammad VI of Morocco and King Abdullah II of Jordan both ascended to power after the deaths of their long-serving fathers in 1999, for instance.

Like their republican counterparts, monarchs keep tight grips over the coercive apparatus. By contrast, they have little need for dominant political parties, which serve little purpose as they cannot be voted out of office. Instead, they must reach out to supporters through other institutions. In Jordan, the king's court (in Arabic, *diwan*) serves as a shadow government, with a bureaucracy that consults with tribal *shaykhs* (chieftains) and other societal allies regularly. Within the larger royal families of the Gulf, rulers also employ the strategy known as dynasticism, or appointing their relatives to high-ranking positions in order to cement ties of familial loyalty. The UAE presents a unique monarchical form, as it is a federation of six royal families that collectively rule through a rotating council.

Furthermore, parliaments can coexist with authoritarian monarchies. The largely unelected assemblies in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE do not count, as they have only consultative roles and their membership is almost exclusively appointed. Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman legally tolerate elected legislatures where opposition forces can contest some seats, alongside royal allies jockeying for influence such as businessmen, tribal leaders, and elite brokers. Yet such legislative bodies have few powers. They cannot form committees to investigate royal spending, military affairs, or other privileged domains. They do not control the police or intelligence apparatus,

and neither can they set foreign policy. Further, the highest offices of government on paper, such as the Prime Minister and the cabinet, are appointed by the monarchy, ensuring that no radical voices enter political circulation. The rulers of Bahrain and Kuwait also keep the premiership within the family, always assigning the position to a senior prince. If all else fails, monarchs can suspend parliaments altogether during periods of crisis, as Emir Jabir of Kuwait did between 1986 to 1992 and King Abdullah did in Jordan between 2001 and 2003.

The Arab ruling monarchies are commonly said to persist because they enjoy traditional legitimacy. However, dynastic absolutism has little cultural resonance in the modern Middle Eastern experience. Consider that in 1950, almost all the region lived under some type of kingship. Yet over the next thirty years, coups and revolutions exterminated royal autocracies in Egypt (1952), Tunisia (1957), Iraq (1958), North Yemen (1962), Libya (1969), and Iran (1979). Moreover, when citizens flooded streets during the Arab Spring, they called for democracy by elections, not a return to hereditary rule. In religious terms, royal absolutism also does not automatically flow from Islamic ideals. While the Hashemites and Alaouites descend from the Prophet's family lineage, and the House of Saud acts as custodian to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, not even they claim a divine right to rule. Under Islam, the heavens do not appoint kings, who can no more speak to God than peasants. Leadership must instead be qualified on pragmatic grounds – to protect the Muslim community against foreign threats, for instance, or ensure commerce and public safety.

Hybrid regimes

In Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, and Palestine, hybrid regimes exist. These possess the electoral backbone of democracy, and even present political institutions that could theoretically govern fairly. Yet they are hobbled by serious institutional problems that preclude fair competition and political participation from occurring at the national scale. Those flaws can emanate from many sources, ranging from violent conflict to biased laws and rules that favor powerful elites.

For instance, Lebanon's semi-presidential republic allows for regular parliamentary elections, but its system embodies confessionalism: it allocates state offices and legislative seats to ethnic and religious sects according to a rigid formula to ensure balance. Competition occurs within these communities, but not across them, thereby creating a highly fractured landscape

making governance difficult. However, many believe that overturning this system would spark the kind of communal warfare suffered in the 1975–90 civil war that killed 150,000. Lebanese politics also suffered from the country's occupation by its neighbors, with Israel only withdrawing in 2000 and Syria in 2005. In the Palestinian territories, the Palestinian Authority, which was established by the 1993 Oslo Accords as part of the vision of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, is technically a democracy styled as a semi-presidential republic. However, widespread corruption and abuses of power have marred internal governance, which has also been interrupted by frequent Israeli occupations and constraints. Moreover, the 2006 parliamentary elections resulted in Hamas' shock victory over the secular Fatah Party, the dominant group in Palestinian politics. This fractured the government, increased tensions with Israel, and did little to halt the flow of Israeli settlers into the West Bank, who number over 400,000 as of 2019.

In Iraq and Libya, fragmentation and conflict has impeded democracy. Both adopted parliamentary democracies after the downfall of their dictatorships due to foreign intervention, the former with the American-led invasion in 2003 and the latter with the 2011 NATO-led intervention in the Arab Spring. However, the post-war regime in Iraq did little to overcome tensions between the Shi'a majority, Sunni minority, and Kurdish community. Over the next decade, sectarian violence, flawed elections, and the Islamic State's bloody rise all worked to disconnect the Iraqi public's faith in the democratic process. Similarly, Libya's post-Qaddafi transition allowed for competitive elections until infighting between militia groups and political factions split the country into two competing governments in late 2014, each claiming legitimacy. Recurrent violence, including more recent attacks by the Islamic State and other extremist networks, has also hobbled the political system.

As a special note, as of 2019, Yemen remains in institutional limbo outside these categories of regime types. Its authoritarian republic under President Salih ended during the Arab Spring, but foreign pressures and internal skirmishes prevented democratic elections from creating a unitary successor regime. Its transitional government has been beset by the Houthi movement and countervailing separatism in the south, while the Saudi-led military intervention has destabilized the country, created the worst humanitarian disaster since the Syrian Civil War, and induced doubts that Yemen might ever be unified again.

This brief evaluation of different regime types unpacked the institutions, rulers, and processes. It describes the present circumstance. Yet as the introduction to this chapter invoked, we cannot comprehend the region's present

without reaching back to the past to trace its long-term historical trajectory. The next section therefore tackles the region's modern political development, to provide a bird's-eye view of MENA politics as it has evolved over time.

REGIONAL POLITICAL HISTORY: EVENTS AND PATTERNS

The Middle East echoes with antiquity. The region gave birth to the great monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and many cities date back more than a thousand years and evoke the glory of empires past, such as Alexandria, Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, Fez, Istanbul, Jerusalem, and Mecca. This heritage began in the Near East, which hosted some of the earliest recorded civilizations during the Bronze Age. The Fertile Crescent in present-day Iraq gave rise to the Sumerian Kingdom after 4,000 BC, while the Nile River nourished Ancient Egypt beginning about 3,200 BC. Other major civilizations included the Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Phoenicians. In central Turkey, the Hittite Empire arose after 1,600 BC; after 1,200 BC, Greek colonists flocked to the Anatolian coast. The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah emerged around 1,000 BC. After 550 BC, the Achaemenids – the first Persian Empire – rose to prominence and from Iran expanded to the Levant, Turkey, and Egypt. Alexander the Great conquered these lands and left a Greek imprint that would last long after his death in 323 BC. Further west in present-day Tunisia, Carthage had emerged in 814 BC to rule over the western Mediterranean until its demise seven centuries later at the hands of Rome.

All these early civilizations achieved milestones in human history. Among them were settled agriculture and the cultivation of wheat; the first written alphabets, languages, and laws; and breakthroughs in mathematics, timekeeping, and metallurgy. The Roman Empire came to rule much of the MENA by the first century BC, and the Roman province of Judea, which today overlaps parts of Israel and the Palestinian West Bank, was the birthplace of Jesus Christ. In the twilight of Roman power in the fourth century AD, Emperor Constantine I legalized Christianity and moved the empire's capital eastward to Byzantium, known later as Constantinople (now Istanbul). Whereas Western Roman provinces in Europe collapsed by 476 AD, the Byzantine Empire would subsist for another millennium. Its only rival was the Sassanian Empire, also known as the Second Persian Empire, which occupied Iran, Iraq, and the eastern parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

The beginning of Islam and the Arab-Islamic Caliphate

As Europe underwent the Middle Ages, the story of Islam – the last great Abrahamic faith – began. Islam arose in the Arabian Peninsula. Whereas the south (present-day Yemen) saw small kingdoms come and go after 1,000 BC and the eastern shores fell under Persian influence, the western region, called the Hijaz, escaped external domination. The domestication of the camel around 3,000 BC made possible not only tribal nomadism but also commercial trade and travel, giving rise to towns like Medina and Mecca. In the latter, the year 610 AD saw a merchant named Muhammad receive a divine revelation. Revealing himself as God's last messenger, Muhammad and his teachings became the basis of Islam. The year 622 AD saw the *hijra*, or migration, of the Prophet Muhammad and his believers from Mecca to Medina, an event that also marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. The Prophet eventually returned to Mecca and conquered much of Arabia before his death in 632 AD.

Thus began the epoch of the Arab-Islamic Caliphates, which for the next six centuries beheld various dynasties ruling over a massive empire. Each Caliphate represented not just a form of political governance but also Islamic unity. The title of the leader, Caliph, derives from the Arabic word *khalifah*, which means “successor” – successor to the Prophet as political and spiritual head of the Muslim community, or *ummah*. Yet who could succeed Muhammad was hotly debated. Many believed that Abu Bakr, Muhammad's father-in-law, was the rightful successor, whereas others preferred Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin. Most supported Abu Bakr, who after the Prophet's death became ruler of the first Caliphate, the Rashidun (632–661 AD), but discord lingered. Ali eventually ascended as the fourth Caliph in 656 AD, but many rejected his authority, creating turmoil and paving the way for a second Caliphate under the Umayyad dynasty, based in Damascus (661–750 AD). Most rejected calls to allow Ali's son, Hussein, to become Caliph; in turn, Hussein's faction refused to recognize Umayyad authority, holding Ali's descendants instead as the Prophet's legitimate successors. The followers of Ali became the Shi'a sect, whose various groups now represent 10 to 15 per cent of all Muslims worldwide. Most of the opposing majority assumed the basis of what we now call Sunni Islam.

At the time of its collapse in 750 AD, the Umayyad Caliphate comprised not just the Middle East and North Africa but also much of Spain and Portugal, as well as present-day Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. This was an area of six million square miles, or three times the size of the Roman Empire, although frequent rebellions meant that central authority was

tenuous. The 'Abbasid Caliphate arose next, based in Baghdad (750–1258). While this Sunni dynasty technically lasted for five centuries, internal fragmentation worsened. The position of Caliph was reduced from political ruler to religious figurehead, and smaller dynasties controlled many areas. The Shi'a Fatimids, for instance, ruled Egypt from 969 to 1171. Despite such strife, the 'Abbasid era heralded a golden age for Islam in terms of commerce, medicine, science, philosophy, literature, and other achievements. The oldest degree-granting university in the world, the University of al-Karaouine, was founded during this period in 859 AD in Fez, Morocco; in 970 AD the Fatimids oversaw the creation of al-Azhar University in Egypt, which still serves as one of Sunni Islam's foremost centers of theological education.

The last 'Abbasid centuries saw migration and invasions. New Turkic peoples came from Central Asia, with most adopting Sunni Islam. Some bolstered 'Abbasid rule in Baghdad, while others headed toward Anatolia. Among them were the Seljuks, who captured most Byzantine lands save Constantinople by 1081 and later ruled much of Persia; and the Ottomans, who claimed a modest *beylik* (principality) in northern Turkey by the late 1200s – the seed of their future empire. In addition, European Crusaders, starting in 1096, pushed into the Mashriq, while from the east came the Mongols. Their sacking of Baghdad in 1258 ended the Caliphate.

Ottoman decline, World War One, and western imperialism

The story of the modern Middle East begins with the rise and fall of the last Islamic Caliphate, the Ottoman Empire. After 1299, the Ottoman Turks began enlarging their territorial reach in western Anatolia, eventually swallowing the last Byzantine remnants. By the time Constantinople fell in 1453, the nascent empire had spread across the Aegean Sea into present-day Greece, Bulgaria, and parts of Romania. Ottoman expansion continued, and in 1517 the ruling sultan proclaimed himself Caliph, reviving the ideal of the ummah. At its zenith in 1683, the Ottoman Empire extended from the MENA into central Europe, including the Balkans and Hungary, and nearly conquered Vienna. This period coincided with the rise of the rival Safavid Empire in Iran in 1501. Whereas the Ottomans prolonged the tradition of the Caliphate under Sunni Islam, the Persian Safavid *shahs* (kings) established Shi'a Islam as their state religion. The Safavid dynasty lasted until 1736; by then, Iran had solidified its status as the epicenter of Shi'a learning, doctrine, and authority.

Ottoman primacy waned starting in the 1700s, due to political infighting and competition with the Persian Safavid and European Hapsburg empires.

By the 1850s, industrializing Europe had eclipsed the Ottomans for technological, economic, and military supremacy. Several sultans attempted to arrest this alarming internal decay by ordering the modernization of political institutions, economic practices, and social life – the infamous *tanzimat* (reorganization). Still, Western pressure and nationalist awakenings forced the Ottomans to relinquish most of its European lands, and by 1912 they had lost all of North Africa to British, French, and Italian colonialism. London also took dominion over the Arabian Gulf by signing defense treaties with the tribal shaykhs ruling over the eastern coastal provinces, such as the Sabah dynasty of Kuwait, the Nahyan family of Abu Dhabi, and the Thani clan of Qatar – tribal families that, today, remain the ruling monarchies of their states. Iran suffered similar relegation. Its Qajar dynasty had arisen in 1794 with great aspirations, but over the following century Russian invasions and British trade pressures thwarted the ambitions of Persian shahs. Britain deepened its presence in the country after striking oil in southwestern Iran in 1908, the MENA's first large-scale oil discovery.

World War One heralded the age of Western dominion. By then, the Ottoman Empire covered just Turkey, the Mashriq, and parts of the Hijaz. Few Muslims still saw the sultans as true Caliphs, brandishing political and religious authority as successors to the Prophet. Qajar power in Iran was also greatly weakened through economic and political inertia. World War One sealed their fates, but was particularly traumatic for the Ottomans, who lost the conflict as part of the Central Powers. Famously, Ottoman lands in the Mashriq gave rise to the Arab Revolt after the British government persuaded tribal shaykhs to join its cause. Among these allies was Hussein bin Ali, the *sharif* (steward and protector) of Mecca, whose Sunni family – the Hashemite dynasty – descended from the Prophet Muhammad's tribe and clan. Sir Henry McMahon, a high-ranking British diplomat, promised Sharif Hussein that Britain would support an independent Arab kingdom after the war, once these Ottoman territories were liberated.

However, Britain and France instead colluded in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement to divide the Mashriq amongst themselves. The 1920 San Remo Conference carved this area into mandates sanctioned by the League of Nations. The French assumed authority over Lebanon and Syria, while the British invented Iraq and Transjordan (later renamed Jordan) and administered Palestine (now Israel and the Palestinian territories). Britain chose two of Sharif Hussein's sons, Faysal and Abdullah, to be new monarchs of Iraq and Jordan, respectively. Mandatory Palestine was another matter, as tensions rose between Jewish and Arab settlers. In the 1880s, the

Jewish nationalist movement known as Zionism encouraged European Jews to emigrate to Palestine with the dream of creating a Jewish homeland. In 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour pledged support for that goal. Following the war, internecine violence escalated between Zionist settlers and the larger Arab population. After World War Two, Britain turned over the crisis to the United Nations, which partitioned Palestine into Jewish and Arab states in May 1948. Several Arab armies invaded shortly afterward. This first Arab-Israeli War ended with the independence of Israel – unsettled scores, and the exodus of seven hundred thousand Arab refugees – the Palestinians – many of whom left for adjacent countries like Jordan and Lebanon.

Such events encapsulated a wider pattern of political reformation from the 1920s to 1940s. In some cases, internal disturbances swept away old dynasties and created new political orders. In the Ottoman heartland of Anatolia, Kemal Ataturk led national resistance against the imperial government and foreign occupation. Abolishing the Islamic Caliphate, in 1923 Ataturk established the Republic of Turkey, which exemplified the new secularist ideology of Kemalism. In Iran, army officer Reza Khan deposed the enfeebled Qajars in 1921 and enthroned himself as shah of the new Pahlavi monarchy. By contrast, the Arab world coalesced into sovereign states through the hand of Western cartography. A few were claimed as colonies for settlement by European powers, such as Italian Libya, British Aden (in Yemen), and French Algeria. Most Arab countries, however, were protectorates, in that local authorities had to coexist with a European patron who held the strings of sovereignty through military basing, oil concessions, financial dependence, and other forms of territorial control.

Though brief, this age of Western colonialism left profound legacies. First, it etched out new boundaries without regard to preexisting ethnic cleavages and religious rifts. The hodgepodge societies of Iraq and Libya are testament to such map-making. Western powers also favored certain groups in divided societies, as the British did by privileging Bahrain's Sunni Khalifah family over the island's Shi'a majority; this had the effect of amplifying regnant tensions and planting the seeds for future sectarianism. Second, European powers radically transformed domestic politics by picking and choosing their favored rulers. For instance, in this pre-oil era, the small tribal dynasties of eastern Arabia like the Thani family of Qatar and the Sabah family of Kuwait struggled to regulate nearby tribes and rival merchants. By signing exclusive defense treaties with these clans, the British essentially transformed their tenuous claims to power into permanent rights. The French similarly

transformed the Alaouite monarchy of Morocco, pacifying the last Berber rebellions by the 1920s and thus guaranteeing the dynasty's future.

Third, imperial policies prioritized stability over all else, encouraging routines of autocratic rule. In Algeria, French administrators poured resources into policing and settlement, displacing many local communities; in British protectorates like Jordan, the first national institutions were not universities and hospitals, but armies and bureaucracies designed to maximize social control. Colonial administrators gave little thought to economic development. Hence, agrarian countries like Iraq and Morocco not only remained impoverished but also suffered from extreme land inequality, with a wealthy elite owning most agricultural property. Fourth, oil exploration took off, thanks to major finds in Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Sultanate of Muscat (in present-day Oman). British and American companies controlled most oil production and lent their support to local rulers. For instance, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia formed in 1932 after its contemporary founder, 'Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, conquered other tribes, but only survived afterward through American recognition and royalty payments from American oil companies.

New sovereignty and post-colonial politics

These legacies made post-colonial state formation unpropitious. Some Arab countries gained independence before World War Two, such as Egypt (1922) and Iraq (1932), but most became internationally recognized states afterward. World War Two brought intense fighting to North Africa and parts of the Near East, while Russian and British forces occupied Iran to secure its oilfields. In the end, the war decimated European imperial powers, forcing them to abandon their overseas empires. In the Middle East, among the first to earn formal sovereignty were Jordan and Syria (1946); the last were Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE (1971). North Yemen was already an independent kingdom, but South Yemen resulted from the British abandoning its Crown Colony of Aden in 1967. Not all decolonization was so anticlimactic: France fought a brutal war to retain Algeria during 1954–62, resulting in a million deaths.

At this post-colonial dawn, the kings and presidents of the Middle East and North Africa eagerly joined the new international system. Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Saudi Arabia were among the UN's founding members in 1945, and the Arab League was also created that year. Yet the real challenges to political stability would come not from the outside world

but from within. While most MENA countries had the external appearance of statehood, internally many rulers stood on precarious ground and lacked mass support. Imperial habits meant they were more accustomed to upholding security through iron fists than allowing democratic participation, fostering economic inclusion, or rallying popular sympathies.

The result was instability starting in the 1950s, when a wave of secular leftist and nationalist movements mobilized across the Arab world and Iran. These movements drew upon the new urban middle class, such as army officers, teachers, students, lawyers, and engineers. The most vocal movement, the Arab Nationalists, desired to unify the Arab world, promote economic justice, and end subordination to the West. They targeted not only British ownership of Egypt's Suez Canal, British military bases in Jordan, and Libya's lopsided oil concessions to Anglo-American firms. A watershed moment came in 1952 when, in Egypt, a group of these Arab Nationalists led by Gamal Abdel Nasser upended the monarchy and seized power; four years later, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, leading Israel, Britain, and France to invade. Nasser's Egypt thus became the charismatic vanguard of Arab resistance against Western hegemony. Over the next two decades, more coups and revolutions would create new republics in Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Libya, and North and South Yemen. Oman nearly broke apart during the Dhufar Rebellion, while Iran's embattled Pahlavi monarchy survived only with American help.

As domestic political struggles abounded, so did superpower meddling. The Cold War saw the United States and Soviet Union see the region as a strategic chessboard connected to their wider global competition, and each sought to carve out their interests. Most of all, they wooed the loyalties of different regimes with offers of diplomatic, economic, and military support. For instance, from 1946 to 1990, the United States spent \$92 billion in delivering economic and military aid to favored MENA clients and would-be allies, nearly double the amount it donated to sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America combined. Generally, the Arab Nationalist republics aligned themselves with the Soviet Union, which also supported the Palestinian cause, while the more conservative monarchies plus Israel looked toward the West. Neither superpower promoted democracy, and both accepted the autocratic abuses of these clients. Iran and Turkey were frontline states to this geopolitical discord. Iran, aligned with the United States and quietly supporting Israel, concentrated on Arabian Gulf security and its own development, at least until its revolution. Turkey had made great economic and military strides under

the republican system created by Ataturk, and it served as a pro-Western bulwark within the Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Turkish military protected this posture, given its status as the guardian of the state; indeed, it would undertake several coups from the 1960s through 1980s against civilian governments deemed threatening to national interests.

Above all, Arab conflict with Israel was a frequent flashpoint of foreign intervention and regional violence. The Arab-Israeli War of 1967 had titanic consequences, as Israel defeated a much larger pan-Arab force and began receiving significant US economic and military aid. Three Arab states lost Palestinian lands they had administered since 1948: Egypt lost the Gaza Strip; Jordan, the West Bank and Jerusalem; and Syria, the Golan Heights. Another Palestinian exodus occurred, with hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing mostly to Jordan and Syria. The 1973 Arab-Israeli War ended in stalemate that further inflamed regional frictions. Magnifying such tension was ongoing terrorism by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and other militant groups aligned with the Palestinian cause. Israel's pursuit of the PLO led to its 1982 invasion of Lebanon, then suffering from a vicious civil war magnified by Arab and Western interventions.

The 1970s and 1980s saw deepening entanglements and complications. The Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) imposed an oil embargo against America in 1973 as retaliation for supporting Israel. As economic downturn struck the United States, the region's oil exporters experienced unprecedented wealth – fortunes that would reverse when oil prices crashed a decade later. Another major twist came shortly after the embargo, when Egypt and Israel signed their monumental peace deal in 1978 through the US-sponsored Camp David Accords. A more ambitious multilateral round of Arab-Israeli peace talks would follow in the early 1990s, resulting in the 1993 Oslo Accord between Israel and the PLO, and the 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty. In the late 1970s, though, the Egyptian-Israeli peace reverberated throughout the region; it shocked some and disappointed many in the Arab world.

Another shockwave came from the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy and inspired new Islamist mobilization across the region. Arab nationalism and leftist movements had begun losing their allure in the 1970s, as the dream of a united pan-Arab state, Palestinian liberation, and economic prosperity stumbled against the backdrop of wars and stagnation. Nasser's death in 1970 was also a psychological blow. Many in the urban middle classes turned to Islamism, which held that political and social renewal required restoring conservative religious values and

rejecting Western influences. The new Islamic Republic of Iran embodied this trend. Many nervous regimes in the Arab world reacted by repressing their Islamist movements, but such groups were not all the same. Moderate Islamists advocated peaceful and lawful change; today, Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood and Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement are exemplars. More radical varieties pursued change through violence and terrorism. Hizbullah and Hamas are infamous examples that emerged during the 1980s, the former from the Lebanese Civil War and the latter from the 1987–91 Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, against Israeli occupation.

The Iranian Revolution also foreshadowed future regional conflict organized along sectarian lines. The Islamic Republic soured to neighboring Iraq, then led by the leftist-nationalist Ba'ath Party under Saddam Hussein. The 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War killed nearly a million people and financially drained a region already struggling from low oil prices. America intervened by protecting oil tankers in the Arabian Gulf against attack; one confrontation with Iranian ships drew the United States into its largest naval battle since World War Two. A hobbled Iraq then invaded Kuwait in 1990. This precipitated the 1991 Gulf War, when a Western-led coalition liberated Kuwait and imposed wide-ranging United Nations sanctions on Iraq. Meanwhile, the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 resulted in a period of civil violence. More hopeful was the 1989 Ta'if Agreement, which ended the Lebanese Civil War.

1990s to the present: American hegemony, the Arab Spring, and regional uncertainty

With the Cold War's sudden end in 1991, the United States assumed hegemony over much of the MENA. Indeed, the 1990s represented a time of gradual regional realignment after the rupture of the Gulf War, as America assumed the primary role as the guarantor of security for the region. The decade was not conflict-free even after the liberation of Kuwait; civil wars wracked newly unified Yemen and Sudan, the latter of which contributed to the eventual separation of South Sudan in 2011. Still, major initiatives all featured American fingerprints. For example, the United States helped guide the Oslo Accords, which called for a negotiated Arab-Palestinian peace through a two-state solution in which both Israel and the Palestinians would lead their own sovereign entities. The first step was allowing for self-government in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) – a monumental event that resonated throughout the Arab world,

where many had long seen the Palestinian struggle as the rare injustice that could draw everyone into consensus.

However, indivisible disagreements, such as the status of Jerusalem and territorial boundaries, as well as inconsistent Western support, blocked the implementation of this two-state solution under the Clinton administration. Frustrations boiled over during the costly Second Intifada in the early 2000s and resulted in Hamas's triumph in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, which split the PA. Israeli resistance to peacemaking also deepened after the Likud Party emerged as a dominant party in the early 2000s, resulting in more uncompromising Israeli demands. Needless to say, much like the Bush administration, the United States under President Barack Obama made little progress toward an Oslo-guided peace deal. More recently, the Trump administration all but admitted the two-state solution was dead in a controversial February 2017 meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

America's greater visibility in regional affairs also made it a target. Al-Qa'ida, a radical Islamist network founded by Arab veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War, orchestrated the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. In response, the United States and its allies launched a global war on terror beginning with the invasion of Afghanistan, where many of these militants were based. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq, claiming Iraq had stockpiled weapons of mass destruction; when few such arsenals were found, the war's justification shifted to the need to promote democracy, as occupying forces toppled Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. Leaders in most other Arab countries, as well as Turkey, nervously sought to maintain political stability in a time of global interventionism. Notably, public opinion in almost every Arab society opposed the Iraq War. In some countries, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, regimes faced pressures to enact democratic reform by a Bush administration hoping to remake the MENA into a more liberal region, but most autocratic rulers successfully deflected such demands.

Geopolitically, Iran also began flexing greater muscle, pursuing nuclear enrichment programs while supporting Hizbullah in Lebanon, Palestinian Hamas, and Shi'a factions in Iraq. Perceiving this as a threat, the United States led the charge for intensifying international sanctions against Tehran. The result was a new "cold war" in the MENA starting in the late 2000s, often framed in sectarian terms as a coalition of Sunni Arab countries backed by Israel and the West aligned against the so-called "Shi'a Crescent" led by Iran. The 2015 Iran nuclear deal briefly changed this hardline narrative by proposing to lift sanctions in exchange for nuclear demilitarization, thereby

helping Tehran end its isolation. However, in 2018, the Trump administration withdrew from the framework and re-imposed sanctions on Iran to the applause of many Arab states and Israel, returning the Arabian Gulf zone to a climate of near-war. Turkey sought to maintain guarded neutrality in these affairs; though no longer intending to join the European Union as many thought in decades past, neither did it wish to get drawn into broader conflicts.

The most momentous post-Cold War rupture, however, came not from foreign powers but from frustrated citizens and youths desiring economic and political change. In June 2009, fraudulent presidential elections in Iran elicited the youth-driven Green Movement, which held the largest protests the country had witnessed since the revolution. Then in December 2010, a Tunisian fruit vendor immolated himself in response to police harassment; that sacrificial act of defiance sparked a cascade of popular uprisings known as the Arab Spring. Protests, unrest, and resistance over the next couple of years spread like contagion and diffused like oxygen, as a combination of factors such as social media and grassroots activism gave rise to near-simultaneous confrontations between authoritarian regimes and popular movements in many countries. Demonstrations for social justice also burst forth in Israel and Turkey, the latter entering its second decade of governance by an Islamist party. Israel's own popular movements for social justice mobilized over a quarter-million protesters in August 2011 alone, aggrieved by declining living standards and political corruption.

Yet the Arab world remained ground zero, and it was here that the loudest explosions resounded. By 2012, autocratic presidents had fallen from power in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, while Bahrain's monarchy narrowly avoided overthrow thanks to Saudi military intervention. What began as blooms of people power, however, turned into a darker winter. In 2013, a military coup in Egypt toppled the elected Islamist government, installing a harsher dictatorship. Libya's fragile new democracy splintered as its weak state fragmented into warring camps. So did Yemen, which also became subject to a 2015 Saudi-led military intervention that deepened its civil war and destroyed any semblance of domestic governance. Syria's revolution in 2011 was halted by the Asad regime's unrelenting repression, which resulted in eight years of internal warfare that butchered a half-million people and fueled the violent rise of the Islamic State terrorist group. The Islamic State's conquests in Syria and Iraq prompted Russia, Iran, and the West to intervene militarily, resulting in its defeat; as a corollary, the Asad regime retained power despite the displacement of nearly half of Syria's pre-war domestic population.

As the 2010s come to an end, political uncertainty looms over the MENA in two regards. First, the democratic aspirations of the Arab Spring have been largely unfulfilled, with only Tunisia having become a peaceful, stable democracy. In the other two democracies, namely Israel and Turkey, the same controversial political parties that formed the government a decade earlier remain political centerpieces – the Likud Party and AK Party, respectively. However, while the *supply* of democracy may be lacking outside of a handful of countries, the *demand* for it has not subsided. In most Arab states and Iran, youth-heavy societies continue to mobilize for various issues, discontent with the constraints placed upon their civic and social freedoms. In spring 2019, in fact, new national protest movements rocked the authoritarian regimes of Sudan and Algeria, two countries mostly untouched by the earlier Arab Spring. That this book and chapter are published before their stories are complete is testament to how unpredictable the politics in this region can be.

Second, the MENA has become strategically hewed by new axes of conflict in a way that encages many societies to violence and instability. Israel and many Arab states see Iran's expansion of its regional interests as a mortal threat, and this issue – not nationalism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, nor religion – has become the main agenda-setting item for their foreign policies. At the same time, many localized tensions persist as well, from the frosty Moroccan-Algerian affairs to the Saudi-Qatari rivalry. The Palestinian issue remains moribund. And while the United States is still the most formidable global power, the region is becoming increasingly penetrated by other external forces, among them Russia and China, whose governments sense an increasingly exhausted America reaching the limits of its influence.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East and North Africa is a vast and ancient region. Yet it is not unknowable: the economic structures, political institutions, and social forces shaping these countries today can be analyzed systematically, as this introductory chapter has made clear. Understanding the states and regimes residing in the region, as well as the historical legacies upon which they stand, is the first step towards breaking down the Orientalist wall.

However, politics does not only entail elites and governments bickering at each other. Structural factors also shape the political arena of every country. For this reason, the next chapter shifts gears and focuses less on *states* and more on *societies*, to unpack the geographic, economic, and social forces

that impact entire national populations and thus also presage what political trends may crystallize in the future.

NOTES

- 1 Our sister volume is *The Societies of the Middle East and North Africa: Structure, Vulnerabilities, and Forces*, ed. Sean Yom (London: Routledge, 2019). Read together, both books provide the fullest, most balanced study of modern MENA states and societies.
- 2 For the sake of consistency, this body of water is referred to as the Arabian Gulf in this text, but is also frequently and rightly called the Persian Gulf in other texts.

FURTHER READING

For thorough histories of the Middle East, a plethora of options exist. The best references can be found among the following list: Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 10th ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Albert Hourani and Malise Ruthven, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, new ed. (Belknap Press, 2010); Peter Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East*, 4th ed. (Penguin, 2013); William Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 6th ed. (Routledge, 2016); James Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2015); Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History*, rev. ed. (Basic Books, 2017); and Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. with Aomar Boum, *A Concise History of the Middle East*, 11th ed. (Routledge, 2016). For modern political overviews that evaluate regional trends and make apparent the struggle for democracy, see R. Stephen Humphreys, *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age* (University of California Press, 2005); Roger Owen, *State, Power, and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2006); and Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner, eds., *Democratization and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014). Two works that take the perspective of popular movements and grassroots

resistance as vectors of political change include Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) and John Chalcraft, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). A contemporary look at civic and political activism can be found in Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust, eds., *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), as well as Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel, eds., *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2nd ed. (Stanford University Press, 2013).

Most regional political primers emphasize the Arab world. However, excellent readers of the non-Arab countries abound. For Turkey, see Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The History of the Ottoman Empire* (Basic Book, 2007), and Douglas Howard, *A History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). For Iran, consult Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), and Touraj Daryaei, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History* (Oxford University Press, 2014). For Israeli, political and historical references include Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–2001* (Vintage Books, 2001) and Daniel Gordis, *Israel:*

A Concise History of a Nation Reborn (HarperCollins, 2016).

For work on the region's geopolitics and international relations, see Louise Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*, 5th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2019); Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 2nd ed. (Lynne Rienner, 2014); Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics, and Ideology* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Tareq Ismael and Glenn Perry, eds., *The International Relations of the Contemporary Middle East: Subordination and Beyond* (Routledge, 2013). US-based readers should read Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, 3rd ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Joel Migdal, *Shifting Sands: The United States in the Middle East* (Columbia University Press, 2014); and David Lesch and Mark Haas, eds., *The Middle East and*

the United States: History, Politics, and Ideologies, 6th ed. (Routledge, 2018).

The Arab Spring is a major topic that still commands the attention of researchers. The best works on this include Marc Lynch, ed., *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East* (Columbia University Press, 2014); Mehran Kamrava, ed., *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Fahed al-Sumait, Nele Lenze, and Michael Hudson, eds., *The Arab Uprisings: Catalysts, Dynamics, and Trajectories* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2015); Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds, *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Robert Worth, *A Rage for Order: The Middle East in Turmoil, from Tahrir Square to ISIS* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017); and Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford University Press, 2017).

Online sources

The online world is filled with information – and disinformation (i.e., “fake news”). Reliable websites are becoming scarce, but the following provide a good start. The best sources for continuous news coverage include Middle East Online (<https://middle-east-online.com>), Al-Monitor (www.al-monitor.com), Middle East Eye (www.middleeasteye.net), Al-Jazeera (www.aljazeera.com/topics/regions/middleeast.html), Al-Bawaba Portal (www.albawaba.com), and the Arab Reform Initiative (www.arab-reform.net/). The best Western news sources include *The New York Times* (www.nytimes.com/section/world/middleeast), *Washington Post* (www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/), BBC (www.bbc.com/news/world/middle-east), France24 (www.france24.com/en/middle-east), Reuters (www.reuters.com/subjects/middle-east), *The Economist*

(www.economist.com/topics/middle-east), and *Foreign Policy* (<https://foreignpolicy.com/channel/middle-east-africa/>).

Excellent in-depth coverage of social affairs, cultural issues, and popular debates appear in dedicated research portals. These include: Fanack (<https://fanack.com/>); Al-Bab (<http://al-bab.com>); Middle East Research and Information Project (www.merip.org); Jadaliyya (www.jadaliyya.com); the Middle East Institute (www.mei.edu/policy-analysis); the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy (www.brookings.edu/center/center-for-middle-east-policy/); the Atlantic Council's MENASource Blog (www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource); the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's *Sada* (<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada>); Human Rights Watch's MENA Team (www.hrw.org).