

History of the Middle East: An Overview

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The Age of Reforms (19th century)

The story of the nineteenth century in the Middle East and North Africa has generally been told as the history of an encounter between a dominant Europe and a slumbering Middle East. The date usually given for the beginning of this encounter is 1798—the year Napoleon invaded Egypt and the first time since the Crusades (1098-1242) that a European army occupied land in the Middle East.

In this narrative, an imperialist Europe bent on world wide expansion came to dominate the Middle East and North Africa over the course of the nineteenth century, either through physical occupation (the French in Algeria in 1832, the British in Egypt in 1887) or through control over the economic routes and markets in the two regions. This political and/or economic control led to cultural and social crises in practically every part of the Ottoman Empire, Iran, Egypt and North Africa. First, individuals and then social groups began to seek answers to the reasons behind the ascendancy of Europe and the forced submission of the Middle East and North Africa. Different groups came to different answers. Those who were either educated in Europe or in European schools came to believe that the answer lies in the “modernity” of European political, social, economic and cultural systems. A minority within this new “*franji*” (European) educated elite believed that the only way to defend themselves against continued European domination was to emulate the Europeans in schooling, social customs, political institutions, and economic approaches. A much larger number of these new elites believed that a combination of indigenous

traditions and European ideas would best serve the purpose of “up-lifting” their societies and nations. In fact, some religious reformers, like Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), concluded that this process of selective “modernization” needed to be applied not only to the secular aspects of life, but also to Islam—the religion of the majority of those residing in the Middle East and North Africa.

Opposing these views were a wide variety of individuals and groups who believed, for their part, that any imitation of Europe was undesirable. For religious and secular reasons they argued that what worked for Europe will not work for the Middle East and North Africa. More importantly, they vociferously argued that following in the footsteps of Europe will lead their societies down the road of permanent European domination of the regions. For those Muslims who believed that their society is ordained by Allah [God in Arabic], abandoning “authentic” tradition was anathema to God.

This general outline is somewhat accurate in depicting the history of the nineteenth century in the Middle East and North Africa. However, it also tends to skew our image of the time period in several important ways. The most obvious of these is the notion that the regions were made up of ossified societies and peoples that have not changed—or hardly at all—since medieval times. This assertion assumes that because Europe and the Ottoman empire had been following divergent (but in reality quite interlinked) historical paths, and because Europe attained a technological edge in the 19th century, then that implies a hierarchical notion of historical development that places Europe ahead (far ahead in some estimates) than the Middle East and North Africa. This assumption is very much the same that European writers—and some Middle Eastern authors—espoused with little evidence to justify British and French attempts to dominate

the region. Secondly, this narrative assumes an omnipotent Europe that could unilaterally impose its will upon the populations of the Middle East and North Africa in a uniformly transformative fashion. Any variations and subtleties in the history of the encounter between Europe and these two regions are thus lost amidst such gross assumptions. More critically, it fails to see that this encounter was as transformative to England to France as it was to any of the regions where they succeeded in attaining some semblance of influence. Finally, this narrative fails to allow for the fact that even those who embraced “European ways” did so on their own terms, manipulating and changing these “ways” to fit the particular problems that they confronted in Teheran, Cairo or Algiers.

None of these critiques of the traditional narrative reject the fact that Europe’s greater contact with the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa was a catalyst for historically important change. Rather, they point out the need to take a more balanced perspective on these changes; to place them in their proper context and thus evaluate them as *one* element of the history of these areas, but certainly not the *only* aspect of that history. What is definitive about the nineteenth century is that it was a period of rapid transformations in Egypt, Iran and the Ottoman Empire, where different states--at various periods of time--sought to centralize their authorities over previously decentralized provinces by modernizing their armies and bureaucracies. In the process, transformations extended to education, infrastructures, social and cultural values. By the turn of the 20th century, these reforms had led to a rapid pace of urbanization, countryside to city migration, and greater integration of the Middle East into a world capitalist system dominated by Europe and, later, the US.

Making Nations (1914 - 1945)

The attempts by these various hereditary monarchies (Ottoman Sultan, Egyptian Khedive, and Iranian Shah) to maintain their power through reforms were somewhat successful, but ultimately interrupted by the outbreak of World War I, the imposition of direct and indirect European colonial rule over the Middle East, and the contemporaneous rise of nationalism.

Before World War I, the Middle East and North Africa were fluid geo-political spaces where groups of varying languages, cultures and ethnicities intermingled in the cities and larger towns. Paradoxically, at the same time there were many others (the majority well until the early 20th century) who lived in relative rural isolation. This does not imply the absence of territorial or communal conflicts, or an absolutely static political environment. However, despite tensions which varied greatly in intensity and consequences, most people were able to live within their limited world either coexisting or oblivious to others for the most part. World War I and the subsequent occupation of most parts of the Middle East by French and British colonial forces helped bring about fundamental changes in this geo-political system. The shift was, essentially, from a multi-cultural political community to one that is *supposedly* ethnically unified (although in reality the new countries remained quite varied). This expectation—the most common form of nationalism as defined in that time period—was re-affirmed by the new mapping of these areas through the Anglo-French Sykes-Picot agreement into “nations” with borders drawn to separate, for example, the newly formed Iraq from an equally novel Syria.

For the people living in these territories this re-mapping (political and cultural) was disorienting and oppressive, even as it opened new possibilities. The basic premise of the

Mandate (as European colonial rule was called) was that the British and the French will remain in control of much of the Middle East and North Africa till the peoples of the regions become “capable of ruling themselves.” In other words, the litmus test was whether the newly formed “nations” can govern themselves as nations. Thus, for the people living in Syria—for example—to become independent from the rule *and* arbitrary divisions imposed upon them, they needed to accept the idea of “Syria” and to “prove” that they are a “nation” capable of administering itself. This paradox was but one of the problems inherent in the foundation of the new “nations.” Another equally profound problem is the task of constructing the idea of a nation and bringing it to life—all amidst attempts by a colonial force to disrupt any political action or program which could threaten its “Mandate” rule.

This last issue—constructing a nation—was perplexing for people who were accustomed as far as they could remember to being members of an empire (in the abstract sense) and of much smaller communities in the practical daily sense. In other words, none of their political experiences prepared them to think both at a smaller (than an empire) and larger (than a city or village) level. Moreover, the continuing reality of a multi-ethnic and multilingual society created an immediate and quite obstinate obstacle to the “ideal” of an ethnically unified nation. In fact, the existence of different ethnic, religious and linguistic groups in each of the new nations guaranteed from the beginning a struggle over who would define the nations (and hence the structure of power) and how that definition was to be accomplished. This dizzying set of puzzles was compounded by technological problems (how to reach the multitudes of people living in villages especially when they still formed the majority of any “national” population), economic (the new borders sundered previous trading links that had sustained the local economies, at the

same time that it subjected the “national” economies to the whims and needs of the colonizer), political (what type of government and constitution was to be formed), and cultural (which sources of “Tradition” were to form the foundation of the idea and “history” of the nation). Moreover, these puzzles were compounded by the unrelenting efforts of French and British colonial administrators to undermine the development of any institutions of self-governance (free elections, mass education, free press, and independent judiciary). Their disruptive efforts were driven, in part, by their desire to forestall the development of any independent institution that could undermine their colonial. Equally, they were predicated on racist beliefs that Arabs, Iranians and Turks are uncivilized peoples who are intellectually and morally unable to achieve true democratic self-governance.

Out of these questions there emerged a host of ideas about the meaning and definition of the “nation.” At the smallest level there were local groups who proclaimed a nationalism culturally and/or religiously distinct from the immediate surrounding. Thus in Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey the most prominent definition of nationalism was that the “Lebanese,” “Egyptian” and “Turks constituted the totality of the population defined in manner that rejected any notion of sub-cultures be they Kurdish, Armenian, Coptic, etc. Moreover, this definition drew a strict distinction along the borders between each of these nationalities and the surrounding ones. Thus, and for instance, Lebanon and Syria became in the minds and words of Lebanese nationalists essentially, incontrovertibly and eternally separate “nations” whereby similarities were dismissed as coincidental rather than derived from any historical connection. At a larger level, there emerged political organizations that articulated a larger geographical notion of the nation. One of these was the Greater Syria (encompassing modern day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine)

advocated by Antun Sa'adeh, the founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party-SSNP. Again, an appeal to a distant and unchanging past provided the underpinning for this ideology. Thus, ancient Mesopotamia became directly linked in the ideology of the SSNP to modern Syria bypassing in the process Arab and Muslim history, not to speak of the countless other peoples and cultures that populated the region at one time or another in the intervening period. Imagining a still larger “nation” Pan-Arabists postulated that all “Arabs”—defined by a common language and culture—belonged together in a single nation that would recreate the glories of the past. In this formulation of the nation, religion—specifically Islam, but also Christianity and Judaism—became incidental effects of the main cause: Arabness. Competing with this and preceding secular images there emerged a religious form of nationalism that proposed that Islam is the only viable and acceptable foundation for the Muslims of the Middle East. Moreover, pan-Islamists argued that the emerging forms of secular nationalism are simply European imperial ploys meant to weaken the Islamic world—albeit such a world was never unified in the first place.

In addition to competing ideas about the “nation,” many individuals and groups bent on imagining a singular new political entity had to deal with issues such as gender, class, and ethnicity—however obliquely. As alternative and potentially competing focal political points these identities had to be contained within any particular nationalist discourse. Thus, we find texts from Turkey to Iran, Egypt and Algeria presenting the nation as a “woman” and linking the liberation of the nation to that of the women of the nation. Yet, this liberation was meant more for the betterment of the nation than to improve the lot individual of women. In other words, women’s status was to be improved for the sake of society and the nation, and not for their own

sake. In this manner, liberation—in its gendered manifestation—is presented as a nationalist project and not a humanistic and universal ideal. A similar process took place with regard to class and ethnicity.

Nationalism in the Middle East, then, was a moment of rupture and continuity from the past. The documents in this section will provide a glimpse at the attempts by various individuals and groups to make sense of this change, to control its direction and to build nations where there were none before. The successes and failures that accompanied these efforts are evident in the primary source documents in this section. In their variety they represent the myriad ideological sources of nationalism, the arguments over the form and substance of the nation, the relationship between society and state, and the dialectical tension between the intellectual and political elites' ideas of the “nation” and those of the popular classes. In reading these documents against each other we can begin to appreciate the daunting complexity of the project of nationalism. External pressures, internal dissensions and practical difficulties force us to transcend the monolithic narratives of the “nation” which imbue these political communities with a “naturalness” that seeks to flatten the political and cultural terrain. In other words, these documents provide with a glimpse of the human drama behind the narratives of Middle Eastern nations.

Rise of Authoritarianism (1950 – 2010)

European colonialism in the Middle East and North Africa which tore at the fabric of society, nationalist projects that sought to forcibly create a new “authentic” nation, as well as the economically debilitating effects of World War II left most countries in both regions in a state of chaos. The old political land-owning elites—left over from the Ottoman era—and the new

middle class elites—formed in the second half of the nineteenth century—proved incapable of providing the majority of the people with a unifying goal, or with solutions to their very real economic and social problems. For example, in the 1930s and 40s King Farouq and his coterie in Egypt appeared completely incapable—and at times unwilling—to eject the British out of Egypt. Furthermore, their conspicuous consumption stood in stark contrast to the poverty which predominated amongst the peasants, and the urban poor. Nor were most middle class political parties that much more effective. The Wafd party—which had historically presented itself as the party of the “people”—had come out of World War II with very little remaining credibility. After 20 years at the helm of Egyptian public political life, the Wafd appeared no closer to achieving complete and true independence for Egypt. Furthermore, the entanglement of its leadership in a series of political corruption scandals, and the unwillingness of these same leaders to enact any laws which would ameliorate the lives of the peasants, bankrupted the political fortunes of the party.

All of the confusion was compounded by the dearth of national institutions that could provide a central focus, or some semblance of unity and order for most of the new nations in the two regions. In large part, this situation emerged because of the particular goals of the Mandate powers. For instance, throughout its rule over Syria and Lebanon, France refrained from investing in the establishment and development of a civil service infrastructure capable of independently administering these countries. Moreover, the colonial fiscal policies were crafted to primarily benefit the economy of France, and not necessarily to allow either the Lebanese or Syrian economy to grow independently. In effect, these policies—which were meant to prolong the presence of the colonial powers—kept most countries from establishing visible national

institutions that cut across the various divisive lines in society (class, gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.) The one exception to this was the military and/or the police. These two security organizations arose (however much in a limited fashion) as institutions wherein individuals from all walks of life could presumably (and did to a large extent) participate on equal terms. An ‘Alawi Muslim from the environs of Latakia, a Sunni Muslim from Damascus, a Greek Orthodox Christian from Aleppo, and a Druze from the Golan could join the same Syrian army, wear the same uniform, march side by side in parades and salute the same flag. Membership in the army did not, of course, eliminate all divisions, or overcome all other senses of political and communal belonging. Yet, it did provide one of the most concrete ways in which Syria as a “nation” came to be represented. From outside and from within, the army appeared as the image of a united and ordered structure. This image acquired greater definition in contrast with the political chaos that reigned in civil society during the 1930s, and later. The army appeared “clean” in face of the rampant political corruption, it seemed strong while the civilian politicians were ineffective, it was national when most of the political leadership was sectarian, and it was constituted of the “regular” people as opposed to the ruling elites.

These contrasts were heightened by the loss of Palestine to the Zionists in 1948. While the soldiers and officers of the various Arab regiments that fought in that war appear to have performed fairly well, the war was perceived to have been lost because of the ineptitude of the General Commands, the lack of real support from the Arab capitals, and the outdated weapons which the Arab regimes had supplied to their troops. This humiliation convinced many officers in various Arab armies that the time has come to overthrow the old political regimes and provide a new direction for the “nation.” Over the course of the 1950s and early 1960s this conclusion

was put into practice in various parts of the Middle East. In 1952, for example, Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers overthrew King Farouq, and established a “revolutionary” government whose self-avowed goal was to rescue Egypt from colonialism, and to help it re-acquire its national dignity. This goal—shared over the following years by many other military leaders who took over power in Iraq, Libya, Syria, Algeria and Yemen—is understandable in light of the humiliating and oppressive years of colonialism. The appeal of such a goal is even more comprehensible when one takes into consideration the European “Orientalist” traditions which had sought, throughout the nineteenth century and later, to characterize the Middle East and North Africa as “backward.” Finally, and for some of the people in Egypt—and elsewhere—the idea of a strong, unified and coherent government was a welcome reprieve from the pervading chaos. Thus, despite some strong opposition to the idea of military rule, Nasser, Hafez al-Assad and others leaders were perceived as potential saviors of the beleaguered “nation”—an impression that these leaders strongly encouraged.

In the case of Nasser, this impression took on a greater potency after he successfully nationalized the Suez Canal, and refused to back down in the face of British, French and Israeli military aggression. (The extent of the importance of this moment in Arab history can be gauged by the incredible success of the movie *Nasser '56*, which was produced in 1993 in the wake of the Gulf War, and which re-told the narrative of Nasser and his victory in very positive terms). This success legitimized for a while the emergence of a single-party rule centered on the cult of the “Za’im” (leader). The leader and the nation began to merge into one in the new state. Only the *za’im* could possibly know what is good for the people, and anyone who opposed him or his ideas was considered a traitor to the “nation.” Without being overly cynical, and while allowing

that one of the goals was indeed to ameliorate life for the people of the nation (if for no other reason than to keep them from revolting), the state defined in this manner was one that had little legitimacy. This paternalistic approach was sustainable as long as it appeared that the benefits of the authoritarian state outweighed its detrimental aspects. While opportunities for better life were available for at least a large number of people, the state could justify its political authoritarianism and rejection of any opposition—legitimate or otherwise. However, this was not a situation that could be sustained for long. Economically, states all across the Middle East and North Africa soon proved incapable of properly managing the economy. From conservative regimes like Iran and Saudi Arabia to “revolutionary” states such as Egypt and Algeria the ruling elites faltered in their handling of the economy. Corruption, graft, overly-ambitious projects, lack of economic diversity, over-population, and a residue of economic dependence upon the “West” combined to create serious economic crises at various times for various states. Politically, many of these states also faltered—albeit at various times and for differing reasons. For instance, in 1967 Egypt, Syria and Jordan suffered a most humiliating defeat at the hands of the Israeli army. This defeat of conservative (Jordan) and “revolutionary” (Egypt and Syria) regimes alike destroyed the credibility of states that had previously claimed legitimacy on the premise that they are advancing their countries. Years of military parades and bombastic speeches were emptied of any meaning within 48 hours of Israeli superior military technology. The facades which had provided flimsy excuses for suppression of various freedoms and for sordid human rights records came crashing down leaving the ruling elites exposed to criticisms from all angles.

The Middle East Today

The 1991 Gulf War ushered in a new phase in the history of the Middle East. It was a culmination of a series of crises that thoroughly discredited and de-legitimized most of the authoritarian states in the Middle East. Beginning in 1967 and thereafter the military or military-supported states in these regions came under mounting criticism for their mismanagement of the national economies, their brutal political oppression, their suppression of freedoms, and their political and military ineptitude. Thus, alternative ideas and structures that had previously only been considered by few groups or intellectuals gained increasing popularity during the last three decades of the past century. These ideas can be loosely grouped into Islamic political movements, minority groups, and economic reform.

Political Islam first appeared in the living rooms of America in the image of blind-folded Americans held hostage to a group of bearded and jubilant students. From that point onwards, Islam has acquired the notion of being a religion of fanaticism, irrationality and hatred of the “West.” In popular media the word *Jihad*—mistranslated as “Holy War”—has been repeatedly used to symbolize those tendencies, and to position “Islam” as the new threat—after the collapse of the Soviet Union—to western civilization.

Acceptance of these images as absolute and universal “facts” has been most misguided to say the least, since they are not correct. This is not to say that there aren’t Muslims in the world today who carry out acts of violence and justify them in the name of their religion. But such groups of extremists have always existed across the spectrum of secular and religious ideologies. Yet, the existence of these groups does not make the images and their use any less erroneous;

and they are wrong at more than one level. First, and perhaps the easiest aspect to discard, is the notion that ALL Muslims are of this violent ilk. A moment of reflection would make such a totalizing assertion appear as absurd as the idea that ALL Christians, Jews, or Buddhists are of one nature, and one nature only. Second, the notion that these Islamic groups are anti-Western, medieval, or traditional is equally mistaken. Indeed, many members of Islamic political movements are fully immersed in the modern world. Rather than seeking to retreat from it to a pre-modern existence, their intent is to shape this modernity according to their understanding of religion and its precepts.

Aside from these considerations, however, is the more complicated task of understanding why it is that Islamic political movements have acquired prominence and greater following since the 1970s. In other words, rather than dismiss all such movements, we must try to understand—even if we happen to disagree and disapprove of their goals and tactics—who they are, what they seek, and how they came about.

One of the first clues to the rise of vibrant Islamic political movements is to be found in the crisis of the state—the theme of one of the sections in this book. The emergence of military dictatorships—or regimes supported solely by the military, such as Iran or Turkey, to a lesser extent— in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa considerably narrowed the venue for political expression and opposition. In Iran, for example, during 1960s and 70s the Shah’s government established a single-party rule with a rubber-stamping parliament that made a mockery of constitutional government. Moreover, the Shah’s secret police—the notorious Savak—established an extensive spy network whose sole purpose was to monitor, arrest, torture, and sometimes kill any opponents of the regime. This trend, which was common throughout the

Middle East and North Africa, left very few public spaces where people can voice their discontent. Amongst the most prominent of these is the mosque or religious institutions that could be controlled or co-opted to some extent, but hardly closed or suppressed as was possible with secular political parties and their offices.

Additionally, and at various times, many countries of these regions underwent severe economic crises. Part of the blame can certainly be placed at the feet of the ruling elites who mismanaged the funds of the state through incompetence and corruption. However, there were other structural problems that led to these economic downturns. The rapid growth of the populations, especially in terms of the youth, in the second half of the Twentieth-century meant that a small percentage of the population was having to produce enough to feed and satisfy the needs of a much larger segment of society. More to the point, as these youths finished their education they expected jobs which would allow them to begin an independent life (separate apartment, marriage, children, etc.). Unfortunately, even the best economies could not have accommodated this surge in labor force. The economies of Egypt, Algeria, and Syria were hardly the “best” economies. For example, Algeria’s main source of hard currency was, and still is, the export of petroleum. As the prices of that resource took a downturn in the 1980s, the revenues of the state equally and precipitously plummeted. In real terms, this meant that the services which the state had previously provided (subsidies of food, transport, fuel, etc.) had to be cut severely, and as happens in most places, it was the lower classes who bore the brunt of these cuts. Simultaneously, the one safety valve—emigration to France—through which hundreds of thousands of Algerian youth had previously (1960s and 70s) escaped poverty was being closed off. Economic hard times in France, and an intolerant mood of racism meant that few Algerians

were allowed to immigrate into France during the latter part of the 1980s. Together the decrease in oil prices and the closing off of French borders to Algerians, left hundreds of thousands of Algerian young men and women jobless and penniless. The unemployment rate in Algeria in 1989 was 36% and it was double that among the 18-25 age group. This situation left many of the young men socially frustrated, and as they searched for answers to their dilemma they focused on their government as the culprit.

Lastly, the globalization of Western (and particularly American) culture has had some detrimental effects on many societies in the Middle East and North Africa. The spread of American pop music, clothing, food chains and film has brought along with them a set of values that are at time jarring to many local sensibilities. For example, the 1970s television show *Dallas* was one of the most popular shows in Egypt. On Thursday evenings the streets of Cairo would practically empty as people of all walks of life followed the unfolding soap opera of immense wealth, unbridled greed, barely concealed sex and betrayal. While all these themes were, of course, present amongst the elites of Egypt, they remained private matters, rather than public displays as *Dallas* came to be. Thus, the show contradicted the premises of public morals in Egyptian society and created a tension between local values inculcated through upbringing, and foreign values projected from the television sets. This tension threatened some Egyptians because it represented a loss of “authenticity” and morality. Without necessarily agreeing with such dire and monolithic assessments, we can still appreciate the existence and cost of such a tension on society. What makes this cultural clash—perceived or real—more complicated is the imbalance in the power behind the cultural representations. *Dallas*, *Coca Cola* or *MacDonald’s* arrive in these societies with far more polished image (even if the content leaves much to be

desired) than any local products. Thus, and for the obvious purpose of selling their products, these foreign companies project far more powerful cultural images that sometimes dwarf their local counterparts. To drink Coke, eat at MacDonald's and wear Nike become expensive icons of cultural superiority which can only be attained by those few Egyptians who have disposable incomes. Thus, the western values become also symbols of class divisions, and give rise to further tensions.

Islamic political movements became popular after 1967 because—for many of the lower classes—they held the promise of resolving all these tensions that we have discussed. The vague notion that “Islam is the Solution” was applied by various Islamic political movements to political, economic and culture problems. Islam—as an ideology developed by modern thinkers like Sayyid Qutb, Ayatollah Khomeini, and Abbas Madani—gave political voice to those who had been deprived of it; it promised a more equitable distribution of income without resorting to Communism; and it provided the framework for an “authentic” and strong culture. Beyond these vague promises, there existed—and remains—a very wide spectrum of the substance of Islamically-based programs. In fact, the very meaning of Islam as a way of life continues to be debated in very real terms throughout the Islamic world. Thus, we cannot speak of a singular Islamic political movement or aim.

These same forces that help explain the rise of Islamic political movements, also produced secular movements that were suspicious of the Islamists, and which rejected the imposition of religious solutions and ideas upon society. Feminists, environmentalists, homosexuals and ethnic minorities have sought throughout this same time frame (1970s until today) to deal with the same issue as the Islamists, but from a secular perspective. The fact that

they have not been as successful, organized or well-financed as the Islamists, does not detract from the critical role they play in shaping the regions today. Therefore, their voices, ideas and arguments are included in this section to allow the student to understand the diversity of opinion in the Middle East and North Africa, rather than assume a monolithic society. The existence of these various views is indeed evidence of the expansion of the call for a more democratic society. While there have always been such voices, now they are more vocal and determined. They are achieving gains not thought possible only 20 years before. For example, in Iran (which is viewed from the United States as a theocratic and medieval state) democracy is flourishing in astonishing ways from an overwhelming 96% turnout for elections, to an astounding number of magazines and newspapers that insistently (despite frequent closures) on demanding reforms and greater freedoms. Even in Syria, where the Assad state has long been able to dominate public discourse, new public intellectual “salons” (meetings) were held in 2000 to demand a loosening of government control over freedoms of speech and political opposition.

Somewhat in tandem with these new movements is the attempt to construct new types of economies throughout the two regions. This movement had been labeled *khaskhasa* or privatization. It is made up of both private and public initiatives (with a great deal of encouragement from the United States, the European Union and the World Bank) that seek to turn previously state-owned institutions and factories into privately and semi-privately held interests. The range of the privatization movement extends from public utilities to banks and factories. There are several factors propelling this movement. Most notable is the fact that the Middle Eastern economies have fallen sharply behind the economies of the Asian Tigers, the United States and Europe. In other words, amidst the rush toward globalization of trade and

commerce, with few exceptions (Tunisia and Israel) the states of the Middle East and North Africa have fallen seriously behind. This economic trend has political ramifications that threaten the hold of the ruling elites over the state. Thus, the concern for creating a more open economy has been growing steadily. Less cynically, most governments do have some level of concern for the welfare of the population, and consider the lack of economic opportunities to be detrimental to the nation as a whole.

Yet, the trend towards privatization has also raised some serious concerns. Critics of this movement have argued that it nothing more than a process which is opening their countries further to American and European economic dominance. Moreover, they contend, while privatization may indeed help a small segment of society, its overall cost for the less fortunate majority is unjustifiable. Culturally, the globalization appears also as nothing more than a continuation and intensification of the process of “Western” domination which is generating a sense of alienation amongst the youth of the nation. In this sense, the shift toward a more privatized economy appears to have contradictory and controversial impacts on the societies of the Middle East.

The Arab Spring movement of 2010 laid bare all these contradictions and tensions as primarily—but not solely—young women and men took to the streets of practically every major Arab city demanding greater freedom, better education, more services and opportunities, as well as the end of the corrupt and sclerotic regimes that had ruled the region since the 1950s.