Middle Eastern societies appear more religious today than they did fifty years ago. Here and there radical Islamist groups continue to threaten governments and civilians. In countries where the Arab Spring unseated dictatorships, Islamist parties emerged to dominate elections and compete for power. Coptic Christians worry about their status in an Egypt governed by Islamists, and Syrian Christians, not to mention Alawites, fret about their position as minorities in a new Syria governed by Sunnis. Religion appears in the name of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Israel regards itself as a Jewish state. Students beginning to study the Israel-Palestine conflict often assume it is essentially the continuation of an age-old struggle between Judaism and Islam. Global television transmissions from the Middle East occasioned by public demonstrations or aimed at portraying daily life show heavy proportions of the population in dress that they or others may interpret as religious.

It is not surprising, then, that contemporary Westerners tend to see religion as a dominant force in the society and politics of the region—a more prominent aspect of life there than it is in the United States or in Europe. This Western perception is not new. Quite to the contrary, European academics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—those who came to be known as “Orientalists” for their knowledge of Middle Eastern languages and societies—emphasized the contrast between the rationalism of the Enlightenment in the West and the mysticism of the East. When Napoleon invaded Egypt, he pretended to be Muslim, so confident was he that proclamations of fidelity to Islam would be sufficient to win popular support for him and his troops. Europe always saw the Ottoman Empire as primarily Turkish and Muslim, even though it included substantial populations that were neither. Religious minorities reached out to Europe for support against their own governments, and religious mystics drew the attention of Europeans with their dances, music, rituals, and excesses. In the Orientalist vision of things, as expressed in literature, textual
analysis, accounts by travelers, social interaction, and works of art, Western secularism contrasted with the religiosity of the East.

Although there is some truth in these perceptions of both past and present, we will argue that the influence of religion on the region is more subtle, more selective, and less determinate than commonly thought. The Middle East is, indeed, home to the world’s three most prominent monotheistic religions—a place where remnants of still-older religious traditions have left important marks and where sectarian splits have created a bewildering diversity of religious minorities. It is a region where most constitutions identify a state religion, and where both governments and opposition groups invoke religious themes to muster support. It is a region where religious community has been an important aspect of personal identity, sometimes congruent with ethnic, local, and political identities, and sometimes in conflict with them. But religion everywhere is shaped and reshaped by human interactions; it is an evolving phenomenon, forged by environments, political entities, social structures, individual actions, and the flow of events. The advent of European imperialism, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the emergence of independent nation-states in the twentieth century, the creation of the state of Israel, the attacks of September 11, 2001—all have profoundly altered the role, significance, and structure of the religions themselves. Transformative through its spiritual impact and social dynamism, religion has also been transformed by context and events. Religion matters, but perhaps not in the ways and to the degree that many Westerners imagine.

What we mean by “religion” is not merely scriptures, beliefs, and rituals. Every major religious tradition has given rise to a set of understandings and interpretations that have evolved, sometimes as a result of disputation, sometimes in response to geographical dispersion, and sometimes in response to political and social circumstances. To speak of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam as though they comprised single sets of scriptures, beliefs, and rituals is thus misleading.

“Religion,” understood as a social phenomenon, includes the communities that have emerged under the leadership of priests, ulama, rabbis, shaykhs, and shaykhas, some claiming divine guidance, others offering only scholarly wisdom and help with the moral law. As literacy has spread beyond the world of religious scholars, laypeople without special training have entered the field to interpret scripture and organize believers in the pursuit of social and political goals. Early Zionists were interested in national more than spiritual redemption, but the notion of Zion came from Jewish tradition. Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt, used religion to fashion a nationalist organization. Zionists and Islamists, though not necessarily religious by intent, necessarily fall within our definition of “religion.” A single religion gives rise to an unlimited set of group identities. Moreover, believers engage in behaviors that they see as religious, such as putting amulets on babies to protect them from evil spirits or visiting the tombs of saints, activities that some monotheists may see as heretical and offensive. A broad definition of a religion includes what people believe and do in the name of that religion.
It is common to assert that the Middle East is a part of the Muslim world or to speak of countries in the area as Islamic. While Muslims constitute a majority in most countries of the region, the term **Muslim world** obscures enormous variation in the social and political impact of Islam and wrongly implies the existence of a vast, homogeneous, transnational entity extending from West Africa to Indonesia. Most states in the area identify in some measure with Islam, but only three—the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan—including religion in their formal titles. By current convention, the word **Islamic** suggests direct inspiration from religion, as in Islamic ritual or Islamic art; Muslim states are those where the majority of citizens are Muslims, those who submit to God; and Islamists are those groups and individuals who invoke Islam in their pursuit of social and/or political ends, according to prevailing academic conventions. Writers often refer to the activities of Islamists as “political Islam,” and call that fraction of Islamists who endorse the use of violence in their cause “radical Islamists.”

We will use “Islamists” to refer to Muslims who are committed to the social and political applications of Islam but label as “Islamic” the groups and associations they organize in the name of Islam.

**Religious Diversity**

The population of the Middle East including North Africa is almost 90 percent Muslim, with about 322 million Muslim inhabitants in 2011, but great diversity exists both within the religion of Islam as it is practiced in the area and among the non-Muslims that make up about 10 percent of the population of the region. The main division within Islam is between Sunni Muslims and Shiite Muslims. The origin of this split dates back to the contestation over the succession of the Prophet Muhammad following his death in A.D. 632. Shiite Muslims believe that leadership should have passed to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet’s cousin and husband of the Prophet’s daughter Fatima. According to Shiite doctrine, Muhammad’s direct descendants through the line of Ali are the only rightful rulers of the Muslim community (*umma*). As explained in Chapter 1, the Prophet was succeeded by three other companions (Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman) before Ali became the caliph following the assassination of Uthman. Ali’s reign was brief and violently contested. After Ali’s assassination at the hands of a hardline Muslim faction in 661, Muawiya, who had earlier waged a battle against Ali, came to power and established the Umayyad dynasty. Hussein, Ali’s second son, led a rebellion against the Umayyads but was defeated and killed in 680 in the city of Karbala in Iraq, becoming a martyr honored by Shiites to this day. Shiites believe that select descendants of Ali called imams were deprived of their rightful claim to leadership by the ruling dynasties that have held power over the Muslim world since the death of Ali. In the Twelver version of Shiite doctrine, the twelfth imam, al-Mahdi, is believed to have gone into a state of occultation—a temporary absence or disappearance—in 874 and is expected to return to reign over the *umma* in the future.
Sunni Muslims are those who claim to have followed the *sunna* (or custom of the Prophet and his righteous companions) and accepted the three rightly guided successors to Muhammad as well as subsequent rulers not related to the Prophet by blood. Sunnis constitute the majority of Muslims in the Middle East today, but some countries in the region, such as Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain, have majority or plurality Shiite populations. While Twelvers dominate Shiism, minority sects prominent in the Middle East include Ismailis and Zaidis, who hold different interpretations of the imamate’s line of succession; the ruling Alawites in today’s Syria; and the Alevi in Turkey, who combine Sunni and Shiite traditions. Sunnis make up an estimated 80 percent of the Muslim community in the Middle East, but they do not constitute a monolith. Practices and interpretations of religious law differ throughout the Sunni countries of the Middle East. There are four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence that represent the diversity of interpretive traditions in the region: the Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, and Hanbali schools. Sufism constitutes an important tendency within both Sunni and Shiite versions of Islam, further diversifying religious practice; it offers a more mystical approach to religious experience and focuses on prayer, meditation, and ecstatic rituals that are meant to induce closeness with God. Sufism’s syncretic ability to draw on local, non-Islamic traditions has made it especially popular in Asia and Africa, and has helped the spread of Islam in these regions.

With Arab migrations and expansions to the north, east, and west, Muslims came to control territories largely populated by Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, as well as by followers of various polytheistic Near Eastern religions in Arabia, the Byzantine Empire, and Sasanian Iran. Much of today’s religious diversity in the Middle East including North Africa is a result of the pre-Islamic religious demography of the region. Muslim rule in the region was significantly more tolerant of religious diversity than the empires it replaced. Designated as *dhimmis*—tolerated religious minorities—by Muslim regimes, Jews and Christians enjoyed the right to continue their religious practice. They were not, however, equal to Muslims. Non-Muslims were required to pay a special poll tax (*jizyah*) and faced special restrictions, such as, for example, restrictions on the size of their places of worship relative to Muslim sites. While religious minorities were second-class subjects, they did enjoy significant accommodations. Jewish communities, for instance, did not suffer the severe limitations and persecution experienced by Jews in Europe. Muslim-ruled Spain and Iraq became centers of flourishing Jewish culture and scholarship, and after their expulsion from Spain in 1492, many Jews fled to the eastern Mediterranean and established their homes in territories governed by the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans developed a pattern of rule (the *millet* system) that accorded Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenian Christians, and Jews official autonomy to manage their own communities and their internal religious affairs.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the number of Jews and Christians in Muslim-majority countries in the region has been falling. Opposition to Zionism in the early twentieth century led to violent attacks against Jewish communities in Muslim countries, which were followed by both expulsions and wide-scale emigration of Jews.
to Israel and elsewhere. The once flourishing Jewish communities of Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Iran, and Syria have all but disappeared. Today the Jewish community of Egypt consists of fewer than 200 individuals. In Morocco, the largest Jewish community in an Arab country counts only about 3,000 to 4,000 members. Non-Arab Iran and Turkey retain larger Jewish communities—about 20,000 each—but their size and influence relative to the wider populations are minuscule. The creation of Israel and subsequent waves of Jewish immigration from Europe and Russia (described in Chapter 7) have, however, increased the total number of Jews in the region. There are currently 5.7 million Jews in the state of Israel. A multitude of Christian communities also have a small presence in the region. These include Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant groups. Their relative numbers, however, have been falling due to emigration and higher Muslim birth rates. The largest concentrations of Christians relative to the size of the country are in Egypt, where Christians, mostly Copts, make up between 8 and 10 percent of the population, and in Lebanon, which has an estimated 21 percent Maronite Christian population and lower percentages of other Christian groups. In Syria, between 8 and 10 percent of the population is Christian. Other religious communities, including Druze, Baha’is, Hindus, and Buddhists, maintain a small presence in the region.

Although still significantly diverse, the Middle East is no longer the haven of religious tolerance it once was. The constitutions of all the countries in the region today, except for Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel, affirm that the country’s religion is Islam, or that the ruler must be a Muslim, or both. Israel, in this respect, is not so different. It does not have a constitution, but its declaration of independence proclaims the country a “Jewish democratic state.” The preference of a state religion at times leads to discrimination against minority religions and to limitations on freedom of religion. By one system of ranking, the Middle Eastern states offer less religious freedom than any other region of the world. Communal conflict, though often motivated by political rather than religious interests, has pitted religious communities against one another in political competition and at times in outbreaks of violence. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, confessional politics have become salient in countries with significant religious minorities, including Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, Syria, and Bahrain.

According to projections by a 2011 Pew Research Center report on the future of Muslim populations, current trends in religious demography in the Middle East are likely to continue in the future. The Muslim population is expected to increase at a higher rate than that of non-Muslims, with lower birth rates and rising emigration by religious minorities contributing to a growing gap. The growth rates of Sunni and Shiite populations appear to be equal, but lower fertility rates in Iran, with the largest concentration of Shiite Muslims in the region, might mean that the Sunni population will increase slightly in relative size. As for prospects of greater religious freedoms and diminishing levels of confessional tensions, the “Arab Spring” of 2011 could, on the one hand, bring a more democratic future together with greater respect for individual freedom and rights. On the other hand, postrevolutionary politics, including
the rise of religious parties and ethnic politics, could lead instead to higher interfaith
tensions in the region.

**Religiosity**

To Westerners, the Middle East has long seemed highly religious. To Europeans of the
nineteenth century who traveled in the area or who participated in European military
and economic offensives, the Middle East seemed to reflect the religion-centeredness
of the medieval period. While God was “withdrawing from the world” as a result of the
European Enlightenment, and European intellectuals were taking their distance from
the Church as an institution and exploring notions of nihilism, Muslims seemed set
in patterns of regular prayer, mosque attendance, dervish orders, local saint cultures,
backwardness, and superstition. Scholars analyzed religious texts and posited an Islam
opposed in its essential nature to the sort of creativity and innovation that increasingly
marked European societies. European social scientists believed ever more fervently
in the idea of progress or modernization, and in the idea that progress necessarily
depended upon the secularization of society.

Many Middle Eastern leaders of the twentieth century bought into these ideas.
Mustapha Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey; Gamal Abdel Nasser, the
president of Egypt from 1952 to 1970; Reza Shah and his son Mohammed Reza Shah
Pahlavi in Iran, from 1925 to 1979; Habib Bourguiba, the founder and president of the
Republic of Tunisia from 1956 to 1987—all sought to liberate their fellow citizens from
the religious practices and beliefs they thought inhibited economic growth. Without
opposing Islam itself, they sought to reduce and reform its impact on society and poli-
tics in ways consistent with Western liberal theory. Working with those same theories,
Western scholars studying the Middle East between World War II and the Six-Day
War of 1967 tended to concur that religion was losing its hold in the region.

Then came a religious revival in the Middle East, and perhaps in the world as a
whole. Student movements once steeped in leftist ideology began to speak the lan-
guage of Islam. Girls whose mothers and even grandmothers had abandoned the veil
suddenly began to dress in more conservative fashion. Young people flocked to sup-
port Islamist movements, most of them peaceful, some of them violent, in protest
against authoritarian governments and against the materialism and secularism of
Western societies. The Gulf states, once viewed as hypocritical or hyperconservative,
suddenly seemed to be leaders not only in their prosperity but in their conservative
Muslim attitudes. One image of contemporary Egypt is that of air-conditioned shopping
malls drawing wealthy, bourgeois women whose stylish and fashionable Islamic
dress seems intended to temper materialism with piety. The Middle East appeared
much more religious in 2010 than it did in 1960.

By some measures Middle Easterners do seem more religious than their Western
counterparts, but by other standards the differences do not appear great. For example,
individuals from a number of Middle Eastern countries, asked to evaluate the
importance of God in their lives on a scale of 1 to 10, responded overwhelmingly with “10,” which is equivalent to “very important” (see Figure 5.1). The percentage responding “very important” topped 90 percent in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, and Algeria on at least one survey. Turks were only slightly less inclined to accord such importance to God. In contrast, fewer than 60 percent of Americans and Israelis said God was “very important” in their lives. When respondents from these countries were asked whether they considered themselves “religious persons,” the contrasts were not so great (see Figure 5.2). Saudis were less inclined than Americans to see themselves as religious persons, and Algerians were still less inclined to accept that characterization. (It is tempting to think that the long domination by France—some 130 years—shows itself in the Algerian response.) The sharp decrease in the percentage of Iraqis identifying themselves as religious persons (from 2004 to 2006) could reflect emigration or cynicism about the role of religion in postinvasion Iraq. It might also reflect the difficulties of conducting random sampling in Iraq during that period.
Middle Easterners may pray more than Westerners; mainstream Islamic doctrine does, after all, call upon believers to pray five times a day. A question asked only in Iran (2000) sought to compare the ideal with reality: “How often do you perform the prescribed five prayers of Islam?” Nearly half the sample said they perform all five prayers every day, and another 40 percent indicated that they pray more than once a week. Only 4 percent said they never prayed. In Turkey, Morocco, Iraq, and Iran, people were asked how often they prayed outside of religious services. The percentages reporting that they prayed every day or at least once a week ranged from 60 percent in Iran to 94 percent in Iraq. The figure was 71 percent for respondents in the United States. Thus, by the response to one question in the survey, 60 percent of Iranians pray outside religious services at least once a week; the response to the other question suggests that 90 percent of Iranians pray more than once a week in some fashion or other.

If one measures religiosity by attendance at religious services, the Middle East does not look extraordinary. The World Values Survey has included this question in...
a number of its instruments: “Apart from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?” Interviewers have proposed these possible responses: “More than once a week, once a week, once a month, only on special [named] holy days, other specific holy days, once a year, less often, never or practically never” (see Figure 5.3). It is not, of course, clear that “attending religious services” has the same meaning in Muslim countries as it does in the non-Muslim world. Among the countries where the question was posed in the earlier surveys, the United States, Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Jordan, and Algeria all stood at about the same level, 40 to 47 percent of respondents saying they attended religious services at least once a week. The proportion of Iraqis, Iranians, and Saudis who said they attended services that frequently was significantly lower. The Saudi result seems to coincide with the relatively small number of Saudis who consider themselves “religious persons.” Egypt stands apart from other countries in the post-2005 surveys for the surge of those reporting they attend services once a week. This does seem to corroborate a perception of rising religiosity in Egypt.

While religion is a polarizing force in Israel, with ultra-Orthodox and radical secularists representing the extremes, there also exists a broad spectrum of religiosity in between. Relatively few Jewish Israelis say that they try to follow all religious traditions, and relatively few say they follow none. Many think of themselves as secular,
even if they light candles on religious occasions. Many see themselves as religious without necessarily following Orthodox prescriptions about diet and behavior. Whether the glass of religious observance is half full or half empty has long been a debate in Israeli sociology. Religious Jews, especially settlers in the West Bank, deplore the lack of commitment of many Israelis to defense of lands linked to important sites of biblical history, while many secular Jews criticize the state’s concessions to the demands of the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox.

Religiosity is important for the outcomes it may produce. One might imagine that higher religiosity in a society correlates with greater respect for religious leadership; with a tendency to join Islamist organizations or religious parties; with intolerance toward minority religions; with seeing international conflict in religious terms; and, more specifically, with believing that religion is a significant reason for conflict between East and West. There is some evidence for these propositions, but it is not overwhelming. For example, respondents who say that religion is “very important” in their lives (10 on a scale of 10) have somewhat greater confidence in religious leadership than respondents who claim it is “less important” (1 to 9 on that scale; see Table 5.1). These two questions were included in the World Values Survey in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey between 2000 and 2002. About 58 percent of those who hold religion “very important” in their lives have a “great deal” of confidence in religious leaders, whereas only 28 percent of those who see religion as somewhat less important or not important at all have a “great deal” of confidence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important is god in your life?</th>
<th>N =</th>
<th>Less important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in religious leaders</td>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>11,164</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quite a lot</td>
<td>5,869</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not very much</td>
<td>2,238</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None at all</td>
<td>1,477</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20,748</td>
<td>2,726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total 100%</td>
<td>Total 100%</td>
<td>Total 100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Confidence in religious leaders does not necessarily translate into conviction that they give adequate attention to “the social problems of our country,” a phrase used in another World Values Survey question. That question generated more variation in response among countries than did the question about confidence in religious leaders. In surveys conducted in 2001 and 2007, 90 percent of Moroccan respondents answered “yes,” religious leaders were attentive to the social problems of their country (see Figure 5.4). About half that proportion of Turks responded positively to the question in both surveys. The percentage of Egyptians responding “yes” declined by about one-fourth, from 83 percent in 2000 to 60 percent in 2008; and a decline of somewhat smaller proportion occurred in Iran, where “yes” responses declined from 62 to 50 percent. In Iran that question may have evoked a response to policies of the regime itself; in Egypt the responses may have reflected conviction that the MB was a collaborator with the increasingly unpopular government headed by President Hosni Mubarak.

High levels of religiosity may pose problems of tolerance, especially where Islam is the religion of an overwhelming majority. Turks, Egyptians, Moroccans, and

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**Figure 5.4**

**ADEQUACY OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN ADDRESSING SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE UNITED STATES AND SELECTED COUNTRIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REGION**

Percentage responding “yes” to the question “Do you think that religious leaders in your country are giving adequate answers to social problems?”

(U.S. respondents were asked about “churches” rather than “religious leaders.”)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All samples</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jordanians are much more inclined than U.S. respondents to say that they mistrust people of another religion. The percentages run from 20 in the United States, to about 60 in Egypt and Turkey, to 67 in Jordan, to 77 in Morocco. In earlier versions of the World Values Survey, respondents were asked if there were particular types of people they might not like to have as neighbors. One-fifth of the Iranian respondents named “people of a different religion”; twice that many people responded that way in Saudi Arabia. In 2009 the Gallup organization asked for a reaction to this statement: “I would not object to a person of a different religious faith moving next door.” Gallup asked respondents to agree or disagree on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Three-fourths of Egyptians and two-thirds of Lebanese respondents said they strongly agreed, but the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which were the focus of the Gallup study, ranged from 18 percent of strong agreement in Saudi Arabia to 39 percent in Bahrain. The study speculated that these results reflected the degree of contact with other religions: the less the contact, the less likely that citizens would welcome a neighbor of another faith. By that theory, Saudi responses reflected the country’s willful isolation.

High levels of religiosity in Middle Eastern countries may have an impact on international relations. The Gallup organization developed an index to measure whether Muslims and Westerners were ready to engage in mutual interaction, avoid violent conflict, and enhance mutual respect. They rated respondents as “ready” or “not ready” on these and other criteria in some thirty-six Muslim and non-Muslim countries. They found that the “ready” group was somewhat more likely to have “attended a place of worship or religious service within the last seven days” than the group of Muslims deemed “not ready.” Among Westerners the opposite was true: religiosity appeared to be inversely related to readiness for the improvement of East-West relations. (The data included Muslim countries outside of the Middle East.) Gallup found that pessimistic Middle Easterners—those who think conflict between East and West cannot be avoided—are more likely to blame religion for East-West tensions than the optimists, those who think further conflict can be avoided but blame religion for tensions (51 percent to 37 percent).

In sum, residents of the Middle East may be somewhat more religious than Westerners, and especially more religious than northern Europeans, but religiosity is difficult to measure with precision. Assessing the effects of religiosity on social and political behavior is not easy, either.

Egypt, a country long reputed to be relatively secular, now appears to rank in religiosity with the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, but in terms of tolerance Egypt looks quite different. Israelis appear more secular than other peoples in the region but nonetheless support political parties dedicated to maintaining and enhancing the place of religion in the society. Although Iran defines itself as an Islamic republic, the available survey data do not suggest that Iranians are more religious as individuals than are other Middle Easterners. Religiosity does not seem to correlate convincingly with support for religious leadership or conviction that religious leadership would
help resolve social problems. As for whether high levels of religiosity slow progress in the region, the jury is still out. The Islamist groups exercising power now (as in Turkey), or beginning to do so (as in Tunisia and Egypt), see themselves as modernizing forces. They invoke religious support in the name of economic improvement and democratic reform. Their opponents, warning of impending danger, attack Islamic parties but not Islam. Israelis blame the ultra-Orthodox but not Judaism for obstructing progress.

Americans concerned about the effects of religion on society and politics may attack evangelicals, fundamentalists, radical sects, the right-to-life movement, or the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) among other groups, but they rarely attack Christianity or Judaism as a whole, much less religious belief in general. For a country at the postindustrial stage of development, the United States exhibits remarkably high levels of religiosity. That religiosity does not seem to have impeded progress or promoted it, but religiosity may help explain certain characteristics of American culture: its emphasis on morality in public life, its identification of religious organizations with democracy, its tendency to see international politics in terms of good and evil. But relying on religiosity to account for concrete American behavior at either the individual level or that of the nation would be hazardous, indeed. The same might be said of the Middle East.

State and Religion

States in the Western world and in East Asia have tended to dissociate religious activities from those of the state. France adheres to a conception of laïcité that reaches beyond the doctrine dear to constitutional theory in the United States, separation of church and state. The French make exceptions to laïcité by adhering to religious holidays and subsidizing religious schools, and the American separation of church and state does not prevent candidates for the presidency from proclaiming their religious views, or presidents from invoking God in almost every speech. Some Western states have official religions (England, for example), but even such states permit nonofficial religious organizations and sustain legal equality of all citizens with regard to religion. Nowhere is there complete separation of religion and politics; rather, there exists a variety of national relationships between state and religion that might be categorized according to several variables, including official status of a religion, state subsidies for religion, rules for religious schools, and protection of religious minorities.

Many in the West tend to exaggerate the degree of separation between church and state in their own countries, contrasting that separation with what they perceive as the conjuncture of state and religion in the Middle Eastern region. “There is no separation of religion and state in Islam,” runs the common dictum. It is not clear whether that statement refers to the Quranic message itself, to the early years of Muslim experience when Muhammad was still alive, to the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, to the Ottoman Empire, or to contemporary Middle Eastern states. The
statement probably applies most accurately to the period 620–632, when Muhammad governed a small but growing state centered in Medina. After 632 the fissures began to appear. Middle Eastern states may tend to be more involved with religion than states in the West, but the enormous variation in that involvement, both in degree and in kind, make it clear that religion and state are not identical anywhere. The variation among countries is inconsistent with the idea that Islam itself determines the relationship between religion and state. If it did, then the religion/state relationship would be identical across the states that define Islam as their official religion, but this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>GIR index</th>
<th>Rank by GIR</th>
<th>Official religion</th>
<th>Largest religious group</th>
<th>% Largest religious group(s)</th>
<th>Largest religious minority</th>
<th>% Largest religious minority</th>
<th># Minority groups with 5% of population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>77.56</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>82–87</td>
<td>Shiite</td>
<td>10–15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>66.59</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Shiite</td>
<td>90–95</td>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>4–9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>62.92</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>90–95</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>5–10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>60.51</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>92*</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>6*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>54.70</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>65</td>
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Sources: Columns 1–3: Jonathan Fox, A World Survey of Religion and the State (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 219; other columns from “Mapping the Global Muslim Population,” Pew Research Center, October 2009, except where indicated. All percentages are estimates based on total populations, not just the number of citizens. Sunni, Shiite, Ibadi, Druze, and Alawite are varieties or offshoots of Islam.

* CIA World Factbook.


*** In Lebanon, Muslims may constitute about 54 percent of the population, Christians 39 percent. The government recognizes four Muslim groups, twelve Christian, one Druze, and one Jewish. “Lebanon,” U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report, 2010.
is scarcely the case. Several states, including Lebanon and Turkey, do not proclaim Islam as the official religion, even though Muslims constitute a majority. And then there is a Jewish state, Israel. There are as many patterns as there are states; the problem is to make sense of similarities and differences.

One scholar has created an index of government involvement in religion (GIR) and coded all nation-states worldwide on five factors that combine to form the index. Table 5.2 orders Middle Eastern states according to their ranking on the index. The five factors are “the official role of religion in the state; whether the state restricts or gives preferential treatment to some or all religions; restrictions placed on minority religious practices; regulation of all religion or the majority religion; whether the state legislates religion.” The range of the index, from 22.17 for Lebanon to 77.56 for Saudi Arabia, suggests the enormity of variation. The presence of Saudi Arabia and Iran at the top of the table, with Israel and Lebanon at the bottom, causes little surprise to someone familiar with those political systems. Perhaps more startling is the presence of Egypt and Jordan near the top. Both countries appear to be relatively secular but quite different from each other: one is a monarchy that invokes religious heritage, the other a republic long governed by a secularly inclined military establishment. The commonality is that both have undergone considerable influence from Islamic groups.

Most countries of the Middle East fall into a relatively small, eight-point interval on the GIR index, from the United Arab Emirates at 54.70 to Kuwait at 46.82 (see Table 5.2). Yet the range of relationships within that set of countries is large. Turkey and Tunisia, for example, have tried to prevent religion from playing a major role in public life, and to do so they have sought to manage official religious practices. Until recently (the advent of an Islamist-led government in Turkey in 2002, the uprising in the spring of 2011 in Tunisia) those governments pursued policies they deemed secular. Their policies contrasted with those of the Persian Gulf states, which have generally embraced religious law as the foundation of their legislation.

The ranking of states on this index should not be interpreted as suggesting that religion is unimportant in the politics of Syria, Bahrain, Israel, and Lebanon. Quite the contrary, power has resided with the Shiite-oriented Alawite minority in Syria, and the Sunni minority in Bahrain. The unrest of 2011 and 2012 in those countries took on a religious dimension as the minority elites sought to defend their privileged positions. The Christian minority in Syria hesitated to join the insurrection for fear that Sunni Islamists would win control of the country and suppress both Christians and Alawites. Tolerance of minorities has translated into rule by minorities in those two states. In Lebanon, the political system depends upon the confessional makeup of the country. Seats in the one-house legislature are apportioned according to religious confession. The state does not try to manipulate the practice of its multiple religions, but religion plays a decisive role in the allocation of political positions. In Israel, religion exerts its force through political parties and through advantages accorded Orthodox Judaism by a state that calls itself Jewish.
One way states in the area distinguish themselves is by the degree of emphasis on religion in national identity. Three states stand out for their dependence on religion in this sense: Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. The Pahlavi dynasty that ruled Iran from 1925 until the revolution in 1979 invoked pre-Islamic glories by celebrating the 2,500th anniversary of the Peacock Throne in 1971. The dynasty ran afoul, though, of a politicized element of the clerical class led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. It was Khomeini who articulated a theory of Shiite governance in the absence of the hidden twelfth imam; it was he who led the revolution and authorized a constitution based partly on his own theory. The constitution of 1979 makes Islam the official religion and details the role of Islam in defining the purposes of the state, the meaning of morality, the process of legislation, and more. Although many Iranians supported the revolution to oppose the authoritarianism of the shah and hoped for a more democratic regime to replace it, the rulers of postrevolutionary Iran have emphasized their success in overthrowing secularism and establishing a new order based in Islam. Islam has become the official foundation of the state’s identity.

The linkage of the Saud family with Islam dates from the eighteenth century, when a relatively minor religious figure, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, allied himself with Muhammad ibn Saud and helped solidify Saudi control of the Najd region, the center of the Arabian Peninsula. The first Saudi state fell to Egyptian/Ottoman conquest in the early nineteenth century; a second state arose and fell in the later part of that century; and a third state arose under the leadership of Abdel Aziz ibn Saud, again in alliance with the descendants and followers of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. By seizing control of the Hijaz region in 1925, the Saudi ruler became the protector of the holy places in Mecca and Medina, and the kingdom became the principal sponsor and organizer of the annual pilgrimage—a business that now attracts about three million tourists a year. The Saud family has identified itself with Muslim causes, such as the liberation of Jerusalem from Israeli rule and the liberation of Afghanistan from Soviet domination; it propagates its version of Islam via the airwaves and via funding for foreign and transnational Islamic groups. The first article of Saudi basic law reads: “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion; God’s Book and the Sunna of His Prophet . . . are its constitution, Arabic is its language, and Riyadh is its capital.” The regime depends upon the legitimacy of a ruling family, but the ruling family depends on Islam for its right to rule.

In Israel the question of religion so bedeviled the founders that they could not agree upon a constitution. That is, while there was no dispute that Israel should be a Jewish state as proclaimed in its declaration of independence, many early Zionists saw themselves as champions of the Jews as a people but not Judaism as a religion. Still, Israel took a name and adopted symbols linked to Jewish tradition. The state reached agreement with Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews about Jewish holidays. The state reached agreement with Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews about Jewish holidays, respect for the Sabbath, Kashrut (religious dietary rules) in state institutions, the automatic
absorption of Jewish immigrants, and many other matters related to religion. For some Israeliis, the state is Jewish because a majority of its citizens are Jewish; if non-Jews eventually became a majority through annexation of the Arab populations of the West Bank and Gaza, then it would no longer be a Jewish state in this view. As a Jewish state, albeit unofficially, Israel has solicited support from the worldwide Jewish diaspora; it often speaks up on behalf of discrimination against Jews everywhere, even though individual leaders of the state do not necessarily see themselves or their duties as religious.

Nowhere else in the region is the linkage between religion and identity of the state as strong as it is in these three cases, but in two other states— Jordan and Morocco—leaders claim special ties to religion. The Moroccan king calls himself “Commander of the Faithful,” a title adopted by the second successor to the Prophet, Umar, and used by the leaders of the Muslim community until the end of the seventh century and beyond.16 The king of Morocco claims to be Sharifian, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, and the king of Jordan comes from a family that traces its lineage to the clan of the Prophet, the clan of Hashim. Both monarchs lead religious services and speak on religious occasions. Because the Sunni tradition offers no clear theory of governance, leaders calling themselves caliphs, sultans, amirs, shaykhs, or kings have asserted their authority and sought legitimating support from the scholarly community, the ulama. The Saud family, in alliance with Wahhabi ulama, best exemplifies this mutual dependence; the Jordanian and Moroccan rulers fall into that tradition, as do the rulers of the smaller states along the Persian Gulf.

**Morality and Legislation**

Religious ideas about morality underpin legislation in all countries. Several Muslim states of the Middle East commit themselves in their constitutions to follow legal rules developed within the Islamic tradition, rules known collectively as the sharia. Saudi Arabia and Iran make the strongest commitments in this regard. Article 23 of Saudi basic law proclaims: “The state protects Islam; it implements its Sharia; it orders people to do right and shun evil; it fulfills the duty regarding God’s call.” The Iranian constitution declares: “All civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria.” Egypt makes the sharia “the principal source of legislation,” the Kuwaiti constitution refers to the sharia as a “main source of legislation,” and the other Persian Gulf states subscribe to a similar formula. The Iraqi constitution adopted after American occupation specifies that “no law contradicting the established provisions of Islam may be established.”

Such provisions might suggest a uniformity of legislation among these states, but uniformity there is not—not in the significance attached to constitutions, and not in the interpretation of those clauses. What constitutes Islamic law is a matter of disagreement not just between Shiites and Sunnis but within the separate Shiite and Sunni traditions. Elaborated at great length in many different versions, now as in the
past, the sharia is the product of human efforts to define God’s will for human beings. While the word *sharia* is often translated as “holy law,” its status is nonetheless quite different from that of the Quran, which Muslims regard as the word of God. The great legal scholars of the medieval period worked from the Quran, which provides relatively little basis for law, and from the sunna of the Prophet. While the sunna originally referred to how things were done in the time of the Prophet, the lawyers came to identify it with a set of documents—the *hadith* literature—reporting what the Prophet or his companions had said or done. The development of law thus depended heavily on a filtering of the *ahadith* (plural of *hadith*) to sift the fraudulent messages from those regarded as reliable, and then on interpreting these *ahadith* according to a set of principles. There emerged four primary schools of law within the Sunni tradition, marked by the application of somewhat different principles and by differential reliance on the *hadith* literature. While each school of Sunni legal thought bears the name of its founder, many scholars contributed and continue to contribute to the development of each of them. Shiites have their own collections of *hadith* and a legal tradition elaborated over the centuries. For these reasons uniform endorsement of the sharia does not mean uniformity of legislation.

Most Muslim countries of the Middle East distinguish between matters subject to the jurisdiction of civil courts and those reserved for judgment by religious courts. States often assign personal and family matters such as apostasy, marriage, divorce, inheritance, and property rights to the sharia system. The religious courts have typically insisted upon treating women as subordinate to men and subject to some measure of segregation. Only Iran and Saudi Arabia make no official distinction between civil and religious courts. These countries both depend on a morals police to make sure that the rules of the sharia (as they interpret them) are enforced. The morals police (*mutawwain*) can warn or arrest women (or men) they judge to be dressed immodestly; raid parties where alcohol is being served; and, in the case of Saudi Arabia, stop women who are driving automobiles. The Saudis have made great strides with the education of women but insist that females must not interact in schools, public places, or even the workplace with males who are not relatives. No other Muslim country engages in such effort and expense to segregate the sexes. In Iran, a higher percentage of women now work outside the home than before the revolution, and women outnumber men in the university system. The Iranians do not insist on segregation, only on standards of dress for women appearing in public. Showing too much hair can get a woman in trouble.

The other countries of the Persian Gulf region share the conservative tendencies of Saudi Arabia and Iran, but in less rigid fashion. Far from minimizing a foreign military presence and discouraging foreign tourism, as does Saudi Arabia, several other Gulf states have welcomed American bases (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar) and the tourist trade (Abu Dhabi). These countries have subsidized American universities to establish branches there, without objecting to co-education. In Kuwait women have acquired the right to vote; in Bahrain they have participated in protests. Iraqi women,
who made great strides toward equal treatment under the Baathist regime between 1968 and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, have found themselves disadvantaged by almost thirty years of war and sanctions. The religiously oriented Shiite parties that have won power in postwar Iraq seem more inclined to implement sharia law than did the Baathist government of the 1970s.

Among the Muslim countries of the Middle East, Turkey, Tunisia, and Lebanon occupy the other end of the spectrum. Turkey abolished the sharia court system under the leadership of Mustapha Kemal Atatürk. Convinced that religious forces stood in the way of Turkish progress, he opened the way for women to step into the public realm and urged them to dress in Western fashion. Already in the 1920s, newspapers pictured young Turkish women in ball gowns and bathing suits. Eventually Turkey outlawed the wearing of the veil (even headscarves) for women and beards for men in public places. Tunisia adopted a Code of Personal Status shortly after independence in 1956, a set of laws that established the equality of men and women in virtually every domain except that of property ownership. The founder of the Tunisian Republic, Habib Bourguiba, saw himself as someone empowered to adapt the sharia to the needs of the modern age. His successor as president of Tunisia, Ben Ali, never wavered from his support for the Code of Personal Status, even though he succumbed to the Islamizing pressures of the 1980s and 1990s by building new mosques and issuing elegant editions of the Quran. Since the overthrow of Ben Ali, the electoral success of an Islamic party, Ennahda, has caused concern among secularists about the protection of gender equality. In Turkey, while the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has brought Islamists to power and encouraged Islamizing tendencies in the country as a whole, it has also enhanced the liberty of women to dress as they wish in universities and other public places. The strength of Christianity in Lebanon makes it unlikely that any government would seek to impose sharia rules.

Religion itself cannot suffice as an explanation for the diverse ways that Muslim governments implement the sharia in these countries. Authoritarian governments have not been uniform in their approaches, and there is no certainty that democratization of these same countries would produce uniform attitudes toward sharia law.

Islam and Judaism are similar in the degree to which law has been fundamental to both. That is, while Christianity has emphasized belief as the primary criterion of adherence, Islam and Judaism have emphasized conformity to rules governing behavior. Just as the sharia constitutes an issue for Muslim states, so the Jewish law, the halakha, represents a problem for the state of Israel. From the beginning of the state, legislation proposed by the cabinet, approved by the Knesset, and enforced by the courts has taken precedence over the halakha. The assassin of Prime Minister Yizhak Rabin in 1995 claimed Rabin was violating Jewish law by proposing to trade land for peace with Palestinian Arabs. Israeli courts negated the assassin’s claims and those of rabbis who had been denouncing Rabin’s intentions.

Aspects of Jewish law have found their way into the civil code in Israel through the work of religious parties in the Knesset. Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox parties,
essential to coalition governments, have been able to influence budgets and advance legislation to protect yeshivas, religious education more generally, the definition of Israeli citizenship, and the authority of Orthodox rabbis. Democratic politics in Israel, reflecting the impact of immigrants from the Middle East, have pushed the state toward privilege for the religiously driven settler movements and the ultra-Orthodox. It is the court system, and especially the Supreme Court, that has most systematically championed notions of equality between the sexes and among religious groups, often challenging religious interpretations.

Efforts to implement religious law raise questions about equality of citizenship. What is the position of a non-Muslim in a Muslim state, or the status of a non-Jew in a Jewish state? At the extreme, religious minorities may be excluded from the body politic. That is the case of the Baha’i faith in Iran and atheists in a number of countries. Some countries assert the freedom of belief but then make it a capital offense to abandon Islam (apostasy). In Muslim-majority countries, members of other religions of “the book”—Christians and Jews—rate better treatment than those of other persuasions. In Saudi Arabia, the Wahhabi movement has treated even non-Wahhabi Muslims—Shiites, Sufis of all sorts, Sunnis who practice figurative art or who make music—as the enemy. The Saudis stand for not just Islam but a particular kind of Islam, Wahhabism, that has been intolerant of other visions and other religions from its beginnings in the eighteenth century.

State Regulation

States of the Middle East differ in the degree to which they have wrapped their nationalism in religion. They differ in the extent to which they invoke religious law to support their legislation and policies. They differ to a lesser extent in the ways that they seek to organize and control religious institutions. With few exceptions, the Muslim states have undermined the economic autonomy of religious establishments, made religious scholars into employees of the state, transformed mosques into state institutions, organized and regulated the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and national religious celebrations in the month of Ramadan, and ensured the propagation of religion in the public schools. As a rule, the more authoritarian states have been more intent on achieving state control of religious activity, but the most democratic of the Muslim states in the area, Turkey, has achieved a substantial degree of state regulation in the name of secularism. Lebanon, where no single religion enjoys official status or even a dominant position, looks exceptional among the Muslim states. In Lebanon and Israel, the state has not so much colonized religion as religion has colonized the state. Arab publics dedicated to democratization in their countries seem deeply divided on whether future governments should be secular or linked to Islam.17

The organizational separation of Islam from the state began with the emergence of a community of scholars under the Umayyad caliphate (661–750) and matured under the Abbasids (750–1250). By then the state had become not just a great military
enterprise but an immensely wealthy monarchy housed in splendiferous quarters of a great new city, Baghdad. While some caliphs doubtless exuded piety, others succumbed to worldly pleasures. One caliph, Mamun, who reigned from 813 to 833, backed a set of scholars who argued that reason rather than tradition should be the ultimate arbiter of Islamic law. Such an interpretation would have enhanced the power of the caliphate and the philosophers it patronized. Instead, an emerging corps of traditionalizing scholars rallied popular support and challenged the caliph’s position, insisting that the law must first and foremost be based in the Quran and the sunna, known primarily through the hadith literature. As scholars of the Quran and the ahadith, the ulama achieved a certain political autonomy buttressed by virtue of donations from the faithful and the eventual creation of religious trusts, awqaf (singular, waqf), dedicated to the support of religious institutions. As the Abbasid caliphate disintegrated into a set of regional states governed by military elites, often of foreign origin, local ulama became critical intermediaries, conveyors of legitimacy, supporters and potential critics of the military rulers.

In Iran, the Safavid dynasty challenged the power of the ulama as it moved the country toward Shiism after 1500, but generalized attack on the separation between religious and secular power came later, when the Middle East began to feel the military and economic challenge of Europe. When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, chasing out the Ottoman administrators and the Mamluk military elites, he turned to the Egyptian ulama to help him rule. After the French departed, an Ottoman subject from Albania, Muhammad (Mehmet in the Turkish spelling) Ali, managed to win control of the country and embarked on a policy of defensive modernization that required the consolidation of state power. That entailed, among other things, bringing the ulama under state control by confiscating waqf land and intervening in appointments to high office. At the end of the nineteenth century a British-controlled Egyptian government created the Dar al-Ifta, office of the mufti, which began offering official though nonobligatory rulings on religious matters. Gamal Abdel Nasser took another step in subjugating the ulama when he nationalized al-Azhar mosque/university in 1961, making that center of Sunni learning a state-run institution.

Undertaking a similar campaign of defensive modernization, the Ottoman Empire centered in Istanbul sought to consolidate its power, which—as discussed in Chapter 1—had slipped away from the sultan into the hands of military, bureaucratic, and religious elites. With less success than the Egyptians (who were technically their subjects), they, too, sought to curb the power of the ulama and emphasize the religious nature of the sultanate. Their efforts at constructing a new, stronger state collapsed with their defeat in World War I, but the new Turkish state that emerged, though eager to distance itself from the Ottoman regime, took Ottoman policies a few steps further by asserting state control over all aspects of religion. The state abolished the powerful dervish orders and turned their meeting places into museums. It seized control of all mosques, appointed all religious officials, confiscated waqf (waqf) properties, and assumed control of religious education. On the one hand, Mustapha
Kemal and the other Young Turks who fought off the Europeans and created the new Turkey appealed to the Muslim heritage of the country; on the other hand, they blamed Islam for the decline of the empire and sought to reduce and reform its influence. The mood of the Kemalist elites was ambivalent, if not hostile, toward religion; the Islamist elites of Turkey today sport quite a different mood, but the Turkish state has barely loosened its grip on religion.

The Egyptians and the Turks set examples for the region. State control of religion, though stronger in some states than others, has become the prevailing pattern, and state control always implies ambivalence. The state provides means and resources, but it also imposes restrictions. The typical Muslim state of the Middle East seeks the legitimacy that voluntary religious support could potentially provide, but it does not grant a degree of autonomy that could threaten legitimacy and crystalize opposition. It does not want religious education to be independent of state control and standards, but it supports religious institutions and education, thereby putting itself at the forefront of an apparent surge in religiosity, if only to undermine the potential for extremists to exploit this religiosity and resort to violence against the state. The typical state uses—the word uses is itself ambivalent—religion to promote citizenship and loyalty. The ambivalence extends to the use of state power to enforce religious principles, as in Iran and Saudi Arabia. Is the primary objective public morality, or is it control for the sake of political authority?

Even the celebration of Ramadan, a month of spiritual renewal, social interaction, and fasting, depends in part upon the state and redounds to the advantage of the state. State-owned media try to capitalize on audiences as families gather with friends to break the daily fast. In general, programming emphasizes prayers and readings from the Quran as sundown nears, but then with deference paid to the appropriate religious sentiments it shifts toward entertainment. Sometimes the state network produces original dramas with Ramadan as the setting, but often the network rebroadcasts foreign productions that galvanize audiences but do not necessarily please religious authorities. Music, dancing, dramas featuring romantic dalliance, conspicuous consumption—all can evoke protest even as they draw spectators. Religion serves as the appetizer, state-sponsored spectacle as the main course.

Two states of the Middle East, Lebanon and Israel, constitute exceptions to this pattern of state control. In these relatively democratic systems, the flow of influence has been from religious groups toward the state. In both cases the religious makeup of the population has conditioned the nature and function of the state. Religious diversity prevents both states from proclaiming an official religion and exploiting religion for political purposes, as do most states in the region. Muslims probably constitute a majority in contemporary Lebanon, but they are split among Sunnis, Shiites, and Druze; whom some Muslims regard as post-Islamic. The Christian camp divides among Maronites (Roman Catholic), Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Armenian. To proclaim any religious tradition as the official one would alienate...
significant minorities. In Israel, the Labor-Settlement movement that built the state resisted the adoption of a constitution that would have recognized Judaism as the state religion. Immigration from Middle Eastern countries has strengthened the religious parties in Israel since the 1950s, when the first debate over a constitution occurred, but even now the adoption of an official religion would alienate an important part of the political spectrum in Israel. Religiously oriented parties have never been dominant in Israel, but they have exercised a critical voice in almost every political coalition.

In Israel, state involvement in religion goes well beyond the entanglement of state and religion in Lebanon, because the religious parties have colonized parts of the Israeli state. But religion is less central in Israel than in Lebanon, because voters are not obliged to vote for candidates segregated by religious preference. Most Israeli voters choose parties that are primarily secular in orientation. The extreme left tends to be the most critical of religion, but even the right, though perhaps more observant of religious traditions, has traditionally put security above religion. A very rightist Israeli prime minister, Menachem Begin, made peace with Egypt and pulled religious settlers from a settlement in the Sinai Peninsula to implement that agreement. The main effect of the confessional system in Lebanon has been government paralysis in the face of pressing problems. The Israeli government has preserved its capacity to act in the case of crisis, even though the religious defense of settlement in the West Bank has complicated its efforts to seek a two-state solution.

**Religion and Civil Society**

From the 1970s to the first decade of the twenty-first century, religious movements have become the most effective force in civil society and oppositional politics in the Middle East. With the decline of formerly dominant ideologies such as Arab nationalism, socialism, and secularism that promised to solve the various social, economic, political, and security challenges plaguing the region, advocates of religiously based remedies for the ills of their societies found a receptive market for their untested prescription of an ideal Islamic society. The Arab defeat by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War signaled the death of secular Arab nationalism personified in the figure of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. Later, the oppressive and corrupt nature of Middle Eastern regimes, their inability to deliver on promised socioeconomic advances for their populations, and their reliance on Western backers led to further disillusionment with the ideologies associated with these regimes and frustration with the political realities of the region. In 1979 the Iranian Islamic Revolution that ousted the oppressive U.S.-backed shah of Iran demonstrated the potential power of religious organizing. Finally, the demise of the Soviet Union deprived leftist oppositional actors of their material and ideological wellspring. Combined with the intolerance of authoritarian leaders for any significant oppositional activity and their harsh persecution of political activists, these trends led to the weakening of socialist, secular, and liberal avenues.
for political organizing. Furthermore, the increased reliance of secular and liberal nongovernmental organizations on foreign donor funding often discredited them as viable challengers of Western-backed regimes (see Chapter 6). In this context, various strands of the Islamic movements that have maintained a grassroots presence in almost all countries in the region have come to represent the most sustainable and potentially transformative alternative to the dominant political configurations in the Middle East. The unrepresentative nature of most governments in the region makes assessing the political strength of Islamic movements a speculative exercise, but when governments have permitted free and fair elections—for example, in Turkey in 2002, 2007, and 2011; the Palestinian Authority in 2006; Tunisia in 2011; and Egypt at the end of 2011—parties affiliated with Islamic movements have won more votes than other contenders.

It is imprudent to speak of Islamic movements—or “Islamists,” as members of such movements are often called—as if they belong to a monolithic trend with identical iterations in the varied contexts of the different countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Though they share a particular historical and ideological genealogy and employ a similar religious vocabulary, Islamic movements across the region reflect the specific realities of the countries in which they operate. It is important, however, to recognize both the shared features of Islamic movements throughout the region and their evolutionary divergence in important respects. A common feature of Islamic movements is their commitment to affording Islam a greater place in the individual lives of Muslims, in the public life of Muslim communities, and in the formal institutions of Muslim-majority states. In this respect, these movements are not different from religious movements of other faiths; similar efforts are common among Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and other religious activists around the world. Where different Islamic groups and movements differ enormously is in the interpretation of “Islam”; the extent of, or need for, its incorporation into individual, public, and institutional life; and the method by which this might be achieved.

The notion that Islam could provide the solution to modern challenges faced by Muslim communities dates back to Muslim reformers who, starting in the eighteenth century, sought to respond to Muslim encounters with the West. These encounters, which reformers saw as exposing the weakness and disadvantage of the Muslim world in comparison with a modernizing, scientifically and technologically advanced West, stressed the need for reform if the Muslim world were to catch up and successfully compete with Western powers. The modern religious reformers, the most influential of whom were Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), sought to establish the compatibility of Islam with scientific and rational thought, with technological advancement, and with the social and political realities of modern life. The Muslim world lagged behind the West, they argued, because it had deviated from true Islam. According to them, this deviation grew from the blind following of tradition as developed by Islamic religious scholars (ulama) over centuries. Instead of unthinking acceptance of religious
authority, the reformers argued for personal interpretation (*ijtihad*) of the sacred religious sources—the Quran and the *sunna* (the practice of the Prophet and his companions)—in a way that would make them accord with modern life and deliver the Muslim world from what the reformers considered a state of “backwardness.” Rashid Rida (1865–1935), a disciple of Abduh, continued in the path of reform, but with a more anti-Western stance than his mentor. Rida advocated an Islamic state ruled by Islamic law (sharia) as the solution to the many problems facing the Muslim world, among which confrontation with the West and with Westernization figured prominently. The term *salafi*, or the *salafiyya* movement, which turns to the righteous religious forefathers (*al-salaf al-sālih*) for models of correct conduct, refers to the reformist movement inspired by Abduh and developed into a more conservative tendency by Rida. Though the modern reformers called for the unity of the Muslim *umma*, they generally acknowledged the rising popularity of nationalism and the reality of distinct Muslim states. A majority of their successors around the Muslim world would also subscribe, as a matter of practicality, to the idea that movements must operate within specific national contexts. Rather than trying to unify the *umma* or to reestablish the caliphate, most contemporary Islamic movements work to reform their own societies and states.

Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949), a schoolteacher who founded the Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt in 1928, felt the influence of Abduh and Rida. According to al-Banna’s vision, the Muslim Brothers aimed to reform Egyptian society in order to bring it closer to Islam. He argued, however, that before state institutions could be reformed to better accord with Islamic law, the practice and morals of individuals and society would need to become more Islamic. The Muslim Brothers engaged in welfare and educational work; established hospitals, mosques, and schools; and quickly drew a significant following. By 1949 the Muslim Brothers had established 2,000 branches and enrolled almost 500,000 members across Egypt. The vision of the Muslim Brothers also extended beyond Egypt; they fostered affiliated societies in Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere. Many of the most influential Islamic opposition movements in the region today are the ideological offspring of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers.

Originally supportive of Gamal Abdel Nasser’s coming to power in 1952, the Egyptian Muslim Brothers soon took issue with the Nasser government. In the context of opposition to Nasser and his repression of the organization, the writings of the Brothers’ chief ideologue, Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), became a major force in the movement in the 1950s and 1960s. In militant publications, Qutb denounced the West and nominal, hypocritical Muslim rulers in terms that suggested “true” Muslims would be justified in using violence to achieve an Islamic state. From the South Asian Islamic scholar Mawlana Mawdudi, Qutb adopted the modern application of the concept of *jahiliyya*—the pre-Islamic age of ignorance—and used it to describe contemporary Muslim societies and all other regimes he considered to be the propagators of ignorance. Qutb popularized two important ideological themes:
the concept of excommunication (takfir) of political rivals, and the importance of jihad, which he interpreted as the uncompromising struggle against unjust rulers for the sake of implementing God’s sovereignty. President Nasser’s government imprisoned, released, rearrested, tried, and ultimately hanged Qutb for his writings, making him a martyr of the radical cause. Radical Islamic groups in Egypt and elsewhere in the Sunni world later seized upon Qutb’s ideas to rationalize violent action, including the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat of Egypt in 1981.

Most contemporary Islamic movements have included both the reformist and the more militant strands of their ideological forebears. Contentious relations with authoritarian regimes in the region have often determined which of these strands, moderate or extremist, enjoyed greater prominence in different periods. In general, however, the bulk of activism by the most popular Islamic movements has been in the area of reforming society and politics by reviving and popularizing religious practice, engaging in social welfare work, and creating viable opposition to incumbent authoritarian regimes rather than in militant revolutionary action. Very roughly, the activism of contemporary Islamic movements falls into three categories. The first is religious and social work. The second is political oppositional activity, often through an affiliated political party. The third is paramilitary violence, which is a main feature of only a very few movements. The Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hizballah, for example, both have their own, well-equipped military wings. Unlike most other Islamic movements, however, these two organizations have operated within a context of foreign occupation and have usually maintained military capabilities, at least officially, for the sake of resisting occupation rather than imposing their Islamic vision on their own societies. On occasion, Islamic movements have been implicated in acts of violence, but usually it has been smaller, breakaway radical organizations that have responded to state repression by violently attacking representatives of the regime, their fellow citizens, or even foreigners, as was the case, for example, with the most radical groups in Egypt and in Algeria during the 1990s.

Religious and Social Activism

Reforming society, the objective of many Islamic movements, starts with individual and community-wide efforts to live by Islamic values and cultivate Islamic virtues. These encompass both religious and social practices. Islamic movements have therefore worked to build mosques, promote religious education, offer religious lessons for children and adults, and make religious practice a more central aspect of the everyday lives of Muslims. In addition, the provision of social services has been an integral part of these movements’ efforts. Dedicated to the notion that “Islam is the solution” for the problems of modern states and societies, the offshoot organizations of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Yemen, and elsewhere have established countless health clinics, hospitals, and schools, as well as a plethora of charities that offer
material aid to the poor. Social welfare work has helped Islamic movements demonstrate the power of Islamic commitment as well as offer alternative institutions to those run by the un-Islamic state. Moreover, with the shrinking of state investment in social welfare that has characterized the structural adjustment and economic liberalization policies of the 1980s and 1990s (see Chapter 2), Islamic charity has come to fill the gap in social services. Exact figures are not available, but the number and influence of Islamic social institutions is considerable. For example, studies estimate that by 2003 there were 2,457 Islamic voluntary associations in Egypt and that 70 percent of the 2,000 nongovernmental associations in Yemen were Islamic. In Jordan, the largest association to run schools, kindergartens, health clinics, and hospitals is the Islamic Center Charity Society, which is affiliated with the Muslim Brothers. In the Palestinian territories, Islamic charities ran an estimated 40 percent of all social institutions in the West Bank and Gaza in the year 2000. By 2003, 65 percent of primary and middle schools in Gaza were Islamic, and the Hamas-affiliated Islamic Society in Gaza, alongside other Islamic charities, financially supported at least 120,000 individuals on a monthly basis.

The practice of Islamic charity, which has a long history in the Middle East, has not been confined to institutions directly affiliated with political Islamic movements. Many independent Islamic charities operate in the region with no official ties to movements such as the Muslim Brothers. Nevertheless, taken together, diverse religious charities, associations, and institutions help further the agenda of contemporary political Islamic movements in several ways. First, they demonstrate Islam's power in alleviating some of the socioeconomic challenges experienced by many in the region. They also highlight the state's inability to adequately provide these services and advertise religious activism as a viable alternative. Second, through affiliated welfare institutions, activists gain access to potential recruits among the poor and the lower middle classes. However, Islamic social institutions do not necessarily serve as venues for religious indoctrination or direct political recruitment of the poor. Many Islamic institutions, run by middle-class professionals and attuned to middle-class needs, help build horizontal middle-class networks and create environments in which the Islamic movements can effectively carry out their work.

Third, religious welfare institutions—sometimes explicitly, sometimes unintentionally—help make the vocabulary and mode of action of Islamic movements resonate more effectively with the users of these services. Finally, the fact that Islamic charities and institutions provide vital services makes it difficult for states to completely shut down their activities. Thus, even at times of severe crackdown on opposition groups, Islamic social institutions have been able to continue some operations, a factor that contributes to their advantage over all other opposition actors.

Islamic organizations have drawn attention for the scale of their charitable endeavors in an age of diminishing state services, but they are not unique. The Jewish ultra-Orthodox Shas movement in Israel, for example, runs an extensive network of kindergartens, schools, charities, and welfare institutions across the
country that supports thousands of families. In Egypt, the Coptic Church provides an associational life and social services that help preserve and enhance the identity of a minority community.25

Political Participation

The undemocratic nature of most states in the region has restricted political participation by opposition groups. Even under these limiting conditions, Islamic movements have been able to organize and compete effectively in electoral politics to the extent permitted by the state. Islamic movements have run candidates in elections for professional associations, labor unions, and student councils. When allowed to participate in parliamentary elections, Islamists have participated in 140 different elections across the region since 1970, either through an affiliated political party, by fielding independent candidates, or in coalition with other parties.26 This track record reflects the willingness of Islamic movements to play by democratic rules and submit to the will of their people, even when these rules are severely slanted against them by authoritarian restrictions, manipulation, and rigging. At times, Islamists have boycotted unfair elections, but boycotting a rigged electoral process is among the tools at the disposal of parties committed to playing by democratic principles.

Despite this track record of participation, liberal and secular actors in the region, as well as Western policymakers, have been suspicious of the sincerity of the democratic commitment professed by Islamic movements. This suspicion stems from two assumptions. The first is that Islamists simply use the democratic political game as a tactical means for gaining power, after which, critics fear, they will abolish the same democratic system that had brought them to power and will seek to establish a theocratic state similar to the Iranian model. Such anxieties were among the reasons secular opposition groups, with approval from France and the United States, supported the military abortion of the Algerian election process following a first-round victory by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in 1991. Critics of Islamic movements also cite the violent clashes between Palestinian Hamas and Fatah that followed the electoral victory of Hamas in 2006 and the subsequent takeover of Gaza by Hamas as a reason to doubt the democratic commitment of Islamic movements. Authoritarian regimes invoke the fear that these movements adhere to democratic principles only to win power—“one person, one vote, one time”27 is the slogan—to justify their reluctance to implement liberalizing political reforms. Though hardly enjoying democratic credentials themselves, authoritarian governments try to convince both the secular opposition and the West that “the devil you know—the regime—is better than the devil you don’t know—the Islamic contenders.”28 These fears, however, are largely speculative, and the few examples used in support of such arguments fail to address the integral part that incumbent regimes have played in instigating and propagating the violence that followed these contested elections.
There is a growing debate among scholars of the Middle East about whether participation by Islamists in the electoral process might lead to the moderation of some of their hardline ideologies. Jillian Schwedler defines moderation as “[a] process of change that might be described as movement along a continuum from radical to moderate, whereby a move away from more exclusionary practices (of the sort that view all alternative perspectives as illegitimate and thus dangerous) equates to an increase in moderation.” The exigencies of running in an election, some scholars argue, create incentives for Islamists to moderate. For example, in order to win seats Islamists must appeal to diverse voters, including those who do not necessarily subscribe to their religious agenda. In some cases, they must also cooperate and even create coalitions with opposition forces that hold views which are directly opposed to an Islamist ideology, such as secular and socialist or communist groups. Inclusion of Islamists in the democratic process can also give rise to internal debates about strategy within the movements between hardliners and moderates or between the older and younger generations. Inclusion may also prevent radicalization by offering legitimate forms of participation to Islamists and others who are critical of the existing political situation in their countries and are committed to changing it.

While some scholars argue that inclusion leads to moderation, others think that the causal direction is actually the reverse, that the ideological moderation of Islamists leads them to seek participation and not the other way around. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, for example, Islamists in Turkey, Egypt, and Morocco have moderated their political stances, advocating participation and compromise instead of revolutionary overhaul of the political system, even under conditions of exclusion or the absence of meaningful democratic reforms. Some scholars argue that, in fact, this moderation by Islamists and their inclusion or even co-optation by authoritarian regimes might have the paradoxical effect of reducing the pressure on authoritarian incumbents to pursue genuine democratic reform. However, there is some evidence that the inclusion of Islamists in the Arab world in the last decades is strongly associated with political liberalization. As Islamists participate in the political game more openly, they become less of an “unknown threat” to other, mostly secular, opposition groups and therefore cease to be the “Islamist menace” that authoritarian regimes can use to defer reforms.

Whether inclusion leads to behavioral moderation, or ideological moderation leads to participation, it appears that religious parties in the Middle East generally abide by democratic rules when given the opportunity to do so. For instance, when Islamic parties have competed in elections that required a quota for women candidates, as in elections in the Palestinian Authority and in Jordan, they did not contest the rule and fielded women as candidates. Israel’s experience offers an important lesson as well. Religious parties have freely participated in Israeli elections from the establishment of the state. Since the late 1990s, religious parties have held almost a fourth of the seats in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. These parties have exerted their significant power to maintain and strengthen the religious character of the
state, but they have never sought to undermine the democratic system itself and have played by the rules in repeated elections. The case of the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) serves as still another indicator of how Islamic parties might perform after winning free democratic elections. In power since 2002, the AKP had removed all reference to religion in its party platform by 2011, and now refers to itself simply as a “conservative” party.

Even if Islamic movements are indeed committed to procedural democracy, some critics see their agenda of increasing the role of religion in public life and state institutions as inherently incompatible with liberal democratic principles. Islamic movements often mention in their electoral platforms and their campaigns that they intend to ensure that sharia assumes its proper role. They usually leave unspecified both the extent to which sharia law would be implemented and the procedure by which this would be achieved. Critics fear that the interpretation of sharia law pursued by Islamic parties could undermine women’s rights, the rights of minorities, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion. The Freedom and Justice Party, affiliated with the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, for example, mentioned in its 2011 election platform that it would support international human rights conventions “so long as they are not contrary to the principles of Islamic law.” Similarly, the provisional constitution adopted in Tunisia after the revolution of the Arab Spring requires that the head of state be Muslim. While concerns about Islamic movements for their lack of adherence to liberal democratic values are not unfounded, it is also important to keep in mind that the record of authoritarian incumbents in the protection of civil, political, and human rights is poor. For instance, in most Middle Eastern countries, including non-Muslim Israel, religious law already governs many personal status matters such as marriage, divorce, and citizenship with provisions that discriminate against women. A nonliberal approach to rights is common to incumbent regimes, Islamist contenders, and, possibly, the majority of people in the region.

As Figure 5.5 (on page 240) shows, contemporary Islamic parties perform well in elections that are relatively free and fair. In the latest elections in Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, Iraq, and Lebanon, Islamic parties or coalitions led by Islamic parties won more seats than other contenders. In more restricted elections, such as those in Yemen and Algeria, Islamic parties won far fewer seats. But it is safe to estimate that had the elections been freer and fairer, these parties would have performed much better, possibly winning a plurality of the votes in some cases. Why do Islamists seem to do so well in elections? The most widespread popular perception is that Islamists succeed in the ballot boxes because the poor, who benefit from Islamic social services, tend to support them. But more recent studies point in other directions. Tarek Masoud and Janine Clark, for example, find that Islamist movements are generally run by and appeal to the educated, professional middle classes who are less concerned with economic need and more interested in social and political change. Other scholars suggest that Islamists do well because they have several organizational advantages over other opposition contenders. First, due to their extensive experience
in the management of vast networks of social services, Islamic movements possess logistical skills, experience, and presence that is superior to what any other opposition group might muster. Second, they have better resources as they mobilize devoted volunteers and Islamic charity—*zakat*—while their secular civil society competitors rely on salaried positions and limited donations from the international community and appear tainted through their association with the West (see Chapter 6). A vote for an Islamic party is therefore not always a vote for an Islamizing agenda. Because they are often the most organized alternative to undemocratic and corrupt incumbents, Islamic parties also win protest votes from citizens who do not share the religious commitments of the parties. In the second round of the Egyptian presidential elections, for example, presented with a choice between Ahmad Shafiq, a Mubarak associate, and Muhammad Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, many liberal Egyptians probably preferred to vote for the Islamist candidate rather than for a candidate from the old regime.

Yet organizational advantage and the absence of other viable opposition alternatives do not fully account for Islamists’ electoral success. Their religious ideology also carries a significant appeal and resonates with many in the Middle East. The Arab Barometer surveys, conducted in eight Arab countries in 2006–2007, for instance, found that while an overwhelming majority of respondents supported democracy, they were divided about the type of democracy they wanted. Of the respondents, 45.2 percent favored a secular democracy, and 41 percent preferred a democracy that incorporated Islam. In repeat surveys in eleven Arab countries, conducted by the Arab Barometer Project in 2010–2011, 49.9 percent favored secular democracy while 33.9 percent favored democracy with Islam. This means that many in the Middle East would like to see some role for Islam in governing institutions. Given these sentiments, authoritarian incumbents in the region have in their turn also attempted to bolster the religious credentials of their regimes by employing religious rhetoric and supporting religious education and religious institutions. Their actions have further contributed to the ascendance of religious discourse in the public sphere. It is yet unclear whether this last phenomenon has helped boost support for Islamists by rendering their religious vocabulary the most dominant one in the public square, or on the contrary, whether this has led to greater disillusionment with religious rhetoric. If the “Arab Spring” indeed fulfills its promise of a more democratic political process in the Middle East, electoral results will provide better answers to some of these questions about the support that religious parties enjoy and the factors that account for their popularity and success.

**Contextualizing Violence**

In the media and the popular imagination, the specter of violence hovers over Islamic movements. Especially since the 9/11 attacks, violent action by groups who self-identify as Islamic is perceived as senseless, irrational, and indiscriminate. But violence is not
the mainstream mode of operation for most Islamic movements. The Islamic groups that do engage in violence can be divided into three types. The first type includes nationalist movements engaged in an armed conflict against a foreign occupier. The most well-known and popular among these are Hamas and Hizballah. The second type involves small, radical groups that use violence against oppressive authoritarian governments in their own countries. These are usually isolated, clandestine militias that do not enjoy mass support. Their violence tends to flare up when state repression increases and no peaceful avenues for change seem available. It is also often short-lived, as violence against civilians tends to alienate local populations. Finally, the third group includes loose transnational terrorist networks such as al-Qaida that employ indiscriminate violence in the service of abstract causes and use domestic conflicts and weak states to further their transnational agendas.

Islamic nationalists resort to violence essentially against external occupiers rather than against internal secular rivals. However, the fact that they maintain their own militias makes elections and internal political competition riskier for their opponents; the threat of internal violence remains a possibility. Hamas developed out of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brothers, which until the outbreak of the intifada (uprising) in 1987 against the Israeli occupation was primarily engaged in
religious and social work. In the 1980s Hamas combined its commitment to promoting an Islamic society with the cause of liberating Palestine, couching the latter in religious terms and adopting a discourse of religious jihad against the foreign occupier. For Hamas, regaining Muslim control of Palestine became a religious duty. In the 1990s, Hamas executed attacks, including suicide missions, against Israeli military and civilian targets, killing many and contributing, alongside Israeli violations, to the death of the Oslo peace process, which had begun in 1993. Faced with retaliation from both the Israeli army and the Palestinian Authority, Hamas turned back to focus on its religious and social activities in the late 1990s. The outbreak of the second intifada in 2000, which triggered severe violence from Israel and from secular Palestinian factions under the leadership of Fatah, brought Hamas back into the armed struggle against Israel. Hamas has maintained that it endorses violence only to end Israeli occupation and not to impose its religious vision on Palestinians. In 2006 Hamas participated in the national election of the Palestinian Legislative Council, signaling its intention to become a legitimate political party that participates in the democratic game. Its unexpected victory in the election led to a short-lived unity government with Fatah, which soon disintegrated as a result of internal rifts and external pressures. In the aftermath of the disintegration, violent clashes between Fatah and Hamas ensued; Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, while Fatah dominated the West Bank.

In Lebanon, the armed group Hizballah was established to resist the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon that began in 1982. Building on a network of religious and social services it provided for the underprivileged and underrepresented Shiite community of Lebanon, Hizballah became not only a religious resistance militia but also a popular representative of Shites in Lebanon. In 1989, with the end of the civil war that had raged in Lebanon since 1975, the Taif Accords exempted Hizballah even though they stipulated the disarming of all other Lebanese militias, thus permitting Hizballah to continue its resistance against the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon. By 2000, Israel withdrew from the south in what Hizballah considered a victory of its armed resistance. Despite the absence of direct occupation, Hizballah maintained its arms for the stated purpose of continued defense against potential Israeli attacks and for the liberation of a small disputed area, the Shabaa Farms, still under Israeli control. Since 1992, Hizballah has successfully participated in Lebanese elections and has become one of the strongest political parties in the country. Like Hamas, however, Hizballah’s military capacities, thought to be greater than those of the Lebanese army, contribute to internal instability; the Lebanese state, like the Palestinian Authority, does not monopolize the means of violence. In 2006 Hizballah’s kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers led to a devastating Israeli attack on Lebanon that targeted civilian infrastructure and caused massive destruction. In 2008 Hizballah forces took control over downtown Beirut in a show of military might that was meant to intimidate internal political rivals. Though resolved without violence, the incident demonstrated that Hizballah’s weapons could under certain circumstances be used internally. It is
important to note, however, that in the cases of Palestine and Lebanon, non-Islamic factions including the dominant secular groups have also used force internally to fight political rivals. While armed nationalist Islamic movements can destabilize a country, their resistance to occupation, their vast social services, and their reputation for honesty in a context of widespread corruption mean that they continue to enjoy significant popularity in some places.

Radical revolutionary organizations constitute the second type of Islamic groups that have resorted to violence. They have sought to replace what they consider insufficiently Islamic governments by violent means. These groups have been relatively small and garnered limited support within their countries. Moreover, such groups have resorted to violence not simply as a result of their radical ideology but in response to actions of the state. Their violence has often been short-lived, suppressed by the state and even renounced by their own leadership. Militant activities in Egypt and Algeria in the 1990s, which were among the most visible and violent instances of radical Islamic insurgencies, demonstrate these three aspects of Islamic militant violence.

In the 1990s, the radical group al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya, which advocated the establishment of a purely Islamic state, executed vicious attacks against government representatives, Egyptian civilians, and in extreme cases, foreign tourists. Earlier, the group had cooperated in the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, but in the 1990s its violence greatly intensified. Between 1992 and 1997, it was responsible for 1,442 deaths and 1,799 injuries. These attacks came in response to the increased repressiveness of the Egyptian regime, which closed off alternatives to legitimate, nonviolent contestation of the status quo. The regime also arrested and imprisoned Islamist activists, without discrimination between moderates and radicals, contributing to the frustration of many activists and their turn to violence.

In Algeria, the military coup that followed the Islamic FIS victory in the 1991 election brought severe repression of Islamic activism. In 1992 thousands of FIS activists were arrested, and by 1996 half of the 43,737 prisoners in Algeria's 116 prisons were held on the charges of terrorism. The gravest development, however, was the almost daily killing of Islamists, either through manhunts or clashes during searches. Many human rights organizations condemned the military regime's use of torture, 'disappearances,' and the extrajudicial killing of suspected Islamists.

One result was a radicalization of Islamic activists, who increasingly turned to armed resistance in the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), the military wing of the FIS, and
in more extreme groups such as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The armed uprising quickly deteriorated into indiscriminate violence against civilians and threw Algeria into a bloody civil war. As in Egypt, the loss of civilian life in the widespread violence, alongside effective violent repression by the state, eventually brought an end to the insurrection. In 1997 the AIS declared a unilateral ceasefire, which signaled the return of many Islamist activists to nonviolent activity.49

Transnational terrorist networks such as al-Qaida make up the third type of Islamic groups given to violence. The scale of their attacks against Western targets has drawn great international attention. Although such transnational networks have recruited from among the ranks of radical Islamic groups in the Middle East, their objectives and mode of operation are distinct from those of Islamic nationalists and radical local revolutionaries. Local groups restrict their activism to their own country and aim at regime change rather than international upheaval. Transnational terrorist networks, like the local groups, also hope to establish an Islamic state or states but believe that in order to overturn existing regimes they must target the Western powers that lend material and military support to these regimes. Their ideology, influenced by the writings of Sayyid Qutb, rests on the idea of offensive jihad and is captured in the now famous document of 1998 titled “Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders,” attributed to Osama bin Laden. The document asserts that “[t]o kill the Americans and their allies—civilian and military—is an individual duty incumbent upon every Muslim in all countries, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque from their grip, so that their armies leave all the territory of Islam, defeated, broken and unable to threaten any Muslim.”50

Egyptian radicals such as Ayman al-Zawahiri of the Islamic jihad organization, Omar Abdel-Rahman of al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya, Saudi ideologists like Osama bin Laden, and fighters from other Arab countries met in the 1980s during the Islamic resistance campaign—supported by the United States—against the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan. After their victory over the Soviet Union, armed veterans of the Afghan campaign returned to their countries with the message of transnational jihad. Heavy and effective repression in Egypt, Algeria, and elsewhere led them to move their fight to other international arenas such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Kashmir, and Chechnya, and to weak states such as Pakistan, Yemen, and later Iraq. The name “al-Qaida” has become a sort of a franchise that independent radical groups around the world adopt in their struggle for a plethora of different objectives.51

Despite their dominance of media attention, transnational terrorist networks, together with local radical groups, represent only a small minority of Islamist activists and cannot compete with the more mainstream social and political Islamic groups in terms of popularity and support.

Nonviolent transnational Islamic activism enjoys significantly greater support and influence in the Middle East than the networks dedicated to violence. Transnational Islamic activism promotes the spread of religious knowledge through
the influence of popular religious authorities—such as the religious scholar Yousef al-Qaradawi—and the use of the Internet and satellite television channels such as al-Jazeera. Transnational Islamic charity networks and growing lines of communication between religious activists in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world, Europe, and the United States appear to be gaining in significance at a time when the fringe violent groups are increasingly relegated to failed states or territories without effective government. The transnational educational network established by Fethullah Gülen, an influential Turkish Islamist now resident in the United States, illustrates this trend. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an intergovernmental body with fifty-seven member states, which serves as a sort of UN of the Muslim world, has also exerted efforts to create a forum for international Muslim solidarity.

Conclusion

Scholars writing about the Middle East between World War II and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 paid scant attention to religion as a dynamic factor in the region. They emphasized the importance of understanding religion as an enduring aspect of culture, but one that seemed to be diminishing in importance with an acceleration of social, economic, and political change. The ascendant ideologies of liberalism, socialism, Zionism, and Arabism were all predominantly secular, although some forms of Arabism and Zionism evoked religious commitment. Already after the Six-Day War of 1967 and especially after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, religion began to attract more attention. At the moment, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, religion seems central to much that is happening in the region. States rely on it for identity and legitimacy; civil organizations use it to goad members into action; radical groups engage in violence in the name of religion; and individual Middle Easterners appear more committed to religion than had previous generations. The increased centrality of religion has not, however, recast political order in the region. Islamic groups have challenged regimes in both violent and nonviolent ways, but in doing so, they have necessarily reinforced the nation-state framework at the expense of the umma, the community of all believers, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida notwithstanding.

These developments confirm that religion is a dynamic rather than a static force in the region. Human beings continually reshape their religions, claiming all the while that it is religious belief that impels them to do so. Understood in the broadest sense, Islam is not what it was a century ago; neither are Judaism or Christianity, for that matter. Citizens of this region have availed themselves of religion for social and political purposes in ways previous generations would not have imagined, transforming the nature of religion in the process. This trend may continue, but this is not a certainty. Neither is it a certainty that this trend will be reversed and a global trend toward secularization will be resumed (or continued), as some modernization theorists think it will. To extrapolate from contemporary events is hazardous.
SUGGESTED READINGS


The Syrian state undertook a “revolution from above” (1963–1970) under the Arab Baath Socialist Party, the ruling party since 1963. After years of instability, an authoritarian regime was consolidated under President Hafiz al-Asad (1970–2000) despite built-in communal tensions, continual external pressures, and the long-term unsustainability of the economic order. Bashar al-Asad (2000– ) attempted a “modernization” or “upgrading” of this authoritarian regime, in parallel to a transition to a semi-market economy. However, his attempt to match Western-oriented modernization at home with a Westward realignment abroad was obstructed by the failure of the Syrian-Israeli peace process and U.S. efforts to isolate the country because of its opposition to the Iraq War, conduct in Lebanon, and support of Palestinian militants. In 2011 the regime faced an attempted revolution from below, stimulated in good part by the costs of “authoritarian upgrading” and supported by many of the external enemies Asad’s nationalist foreign policy had made.

History of State Formation

Syria’s geography and history shape its current situation and identity as a state. The main challenge for state-builders has been the incongruity between the boundaries of the contemporary state, long seen as an artificial creation of imperialism, and the diverse sub- and supra-state identities of a population with a long premodern history.

Historically, Syria was a trading civilization; Syria’s largest cities, particularly Aleppo and Damascus, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, long lived off the East-West trade routes. Agriculture is the other basis of the economy, but Syria is half desert, so only 10 percent of the total land surface receives rainfall adequate to support stable dry farming and another 30 percent enough for extensive grain cultivation, which is vulnerable to periodic drought. In times of state weakness, agriculture has contracted under the predations of nomadic Bedouin, whose pastoral lifestyle is adapted to the arid interior. When the state is strong, hydraulic irrigation projects lead to expansion of the peasant agricultural economy. Merchants, pastoralists, and peasants shaped the premodern economy—the latter often victimized by the former two. The current Syrian regime initially expressed peasant revolt against urban domination and attempted state-led industrialization to end Syria’s dependence on trade (in primary products) but has had to come to terms with the country’s merchant ethos.

Syria’s location at a strategic land bridge between three continents, connecting desert and steppe, exposed the country to movements of diverse peoples and
nomadic invasions, which left behind an extraordinary sociocultural heterogeneity. This, plus the country’s geographic complexity—a land of plain, desert, oasis, and mountain—resulted in a fragmented society. Except briefly when Damascus ruled the Umayyad Empire, which stretched from India to Spain (661–750), Syria did not have a strong centralizing state but was a prize fought over by neighboring river valley empires.

The imposed creation of the modern Syrian state after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during World War I left a permanent sense of national frustration. While most Syrians had remained loyal to the empire, after its collapse, many rallied to the Hashemite amir Faisal, who sought to create, under British patronage, an independent, Damascus-ruled state in historic “Greater Syria” (bilad al-sham, which included contemporary Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel). The victorious Europeans had, however, made conflicting promises concerning the future of this territory: while promising the Arabs an independent state, Britain agreed to divide the area and turn over the north to France and historic Palestine to the Zionist movement. France subsequently created modern Lebanon out of western Syria and ceded Iskandarun (Alexandretta) to Turkey. French rule in Syria could only be imposed by defeating the Arab army at Maysalun, the massive repression of several uprisings in the early 1920s, and continued military occupation. This experience generated enduring irredentist and anti-imperialist sentiments.

Greater Syria, despite having no history of independent statehood, might have become a focus of national identity, but the country’s dismemberment and the creation of Israel in Palestine, historically part of southern Syria, generated an identity crisis in the post-Ottoman period. The truncated Syrian state, seen as an artificial creation, did not enjoy the strong loyalty of its citizens, who mostly attached either to communal substate units or to a supra-state ideology, Pan-Syrianism, Pan-Islam, or Pan-Arabism, resulting in identity conflicts that caused much political instability. Secular Arab nationalism was the most successful ideology in filling the identity vacuum because it

**Key Facts on Syria**

- **Area:** 71,498 square miles, including about 500 square miles occupied by Israel (185,180 square kilometers)
- **Capital:** Damascus
- **Population:** 22,530,746 (2012); includes 18,100 people living in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights (2010)
- **Religion:** Sunni Muslim, 74 percent; Alawite, Druze, and other Muslim sects, 16 percent; Christian, 10 percent; tiny Jewish communities in Aleppo, Damascus, and al-Qamishli
- **Ethnic Groups:** Arab, 90.3 percent; Kurds, Armenians, and others, 9.7 percent
- **Official Language:** Arabic; Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, French, Circassian, and English also spoken
- **Type of Government:** Nominal republic, but in reality authoritarian with domination by the Baath Party
- **GDP:** $64.7 billion; $5,100 per capita (2011)

best cemented the Syrian “mosaic,” bringing together the Arabic-speaking minorities, most significantly the Alawites and Christians, with the Sunni majority (albeit excluding non-Arabs such as the Kurds). It also expressed Syrians’ yearning to be part of the once-unified and now lost larger Arab-Islamic world.

Thus, from its birth, the new state was set on an Arab nationalist trajectory that survived countless changes of leadership essentially intact. The most successful political elites and movements were those that championed Syria as Arab and part of a wider Arab nation even if, to a degree, they accepted its (possibly temporary) separate statehood. Seeing itself as the “beating heart of Arabism,” Syria gave birth to Baathism, a movement that sought to unify the Arab states and is still the official state ideology. Syria actually surrendered its sovereignty—in the 1958 union with Egypt—to Pan-Arab unity. By the late 1960s, Syrian Arab nationalism was focused on the struggle for Palestine; no Arab people, except the Palestinians themselves, have found it more difficult to accept the legitimacy of Israel’s creation at the expense of Arab Palestine. This climaxed in the effort of the radical wing of the Baath Party (1966–1970) to make Damascus the bastion of a war of liberation in Palestine. The consequent 1967 loss of the Syrian Golan Heights to Israel gave a specifically Syrian territorial dimension to Syria’s Arabism. The recovery of the Golan became the single most important objective in Syrian foreign policy, a matter of honor and regime legitimacy that was nonnegotiable. This intensified Syria’s Arab nationalism, yet focusing it on the recovery of Syrian land made it more Syria-centric. Syria claimed that the Arab states made up a nation whose overriding national interest was the struggle with Israel and that Syria, as the most steadfast of the frontline states, was entitled to Pan-Arab support.

By the 1990s, a further transition toward a more distinctly Syrian identity had grown out of the gap between the Pan-Arab ideal and reality, manifest in the failure of Pan-Arab unity projects; the costs of the struggle with Israel; the series of separate deals struck by Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) with Israel at Syria’s expense; and the anti-Syrian sentiment expressed in Lebanon after Syria’s 2005 withdrawal. Especially ironic and problematic was that the Baath Party, which won the struggle for control of the Syrian state in the name of Pan-Arabism, eventually consolidated the state. After sixty years of separate statehood, an Arab Syrian identity had been constructed, and the boundaries of the contemporary state were accepted as the normal framework for domestic politics. The persistent dilemma for Syria was that an exclusively Syrian, not essentially Arab, nation-state still held little credibility, and whatever Syrian identity was, its content was Arab. This kept Syria embroiled in wider Pan-Arab issues and conflicts.

**Changing Society**

Syrian society is fragmented—on one hand, by a “mosaic” of communal or “vertical” divisions, and on the other, by class cleavages, rooted in the feudal-like agrarian capitalism that emerged in the late Ottoman, French mandate, and early independence periods. These two cleavages shaped its politics: class conflicts,
combined with nationalist ferment, destabilized the state and led to the Baath revolution. Subsequently, the Baath regime and the opposition exploited communalism, and the regime used primordial ties and class organization to consolidate power.

**Communal Cleavages**

Syria's ethnic and religious diversity, combined with a geographically shaped localism, fostered strong loyalties to substate communal groups, cities, and regions. Indirect rule of identity groups (millets) through religious leaders and notables during the Ottoman Empire (1500–1918) and the divide-and-rule policy of the French mandate (1920–1946) strengthened substate identities. Nevertheless, the composition of the current Syrian state is over 90 percent Arab and 74 percent Sunni Muslim. Ethnic minorities include Kurds (7 percent), Armenians, and small numbers of Assyrians, Circassians, and Turkmen. Religious minorities include Greek Orthodox Christians (8 percent), various smaller Christian sects, and several Islamic minority sects—the most important being the Alawites (12 percent), the Druze (3 percent), and the Isma'alis (1.5 percent).

A mosaic society, framed by an artificial state, makes Syria potentially vulnerable to communal strife, although a majority Arab identity, formal equality of all citizens in a secular state, a long history of tolerance, and the cross-sectarian coalition incorporated into the Baath regime long contained and eased cleavages. The constitution specifies that the president be a Muslim and Islamic law a main source of legislation—congruent with the fact that 90 percent of Syria's population is Muslim; however, religious and ethnic minorities enjoy autonomy in matters of personal status and greater protections than in most other Middle Eastern states by virtue of the Baath regime's character as, in some ways, one of minorities.

The main communal issue is the unequal distribution of power. The Alawite minority, traditionally denied political influence by the Sunni majority, flocked to the armed forces and to the secular Baath Party, the two institutions that together came to rule Syria after 1963. The Sunni Muslim majority, the religiously minded of whom regard the Alawites as heretical, inevitably resents their resulting disproportionate political power. The Muslim Brotherhood led a violent uprising from the late 1970s to the early 1980s against what it called the “Alawite regime.” Brutally suppressed, the episode left enduring mistrust across communal divides. Intermarriage among communities remains the exception, although at the top of the social pyramid, partnerships between Alawite political elites and Sunni or Christian businessmen eased the sharp rifts of the early 1980s. The 2011 uprising in Syria has sharply exacerbated communal cleavages. Syria's Arab identity also assumes the Arabization of minorities such as the Kurds. The major source of Kurdish disaffection has been the denial of citizenship rights to some 100,000 Kurds who were settled in Syria under the French mandate. In 2004 Syria experienced major unrest in the Kurdish-populated areas of eastern Syria, in part encouraged by the autonomy enjoyed by Iraqi Kurds.

**Class Conflict (1946–1963)**

For the first quarter-century of its independent existence, the Syrian state was weak and unstable. The postindependence period was a continuation of the politics of Ottoman notables, and a few great families inherited power when the French departed. Several outstanding leaders, such as Saadallah al-Jabari, Ibrahim Hananu, Jamil Mardam Bey, Hashim al-Atasi, and Shukri al-Quwatli, were grouped in the National Bloc (al-kutla al-wataniya), a rudimentary party built on its leaders' clientele links to the bosses of the urban quarters and the peasant dependents of landlord politicians. The first president, Shukri al-Quwatli, came to power endowed with a measure of legitimacy from the 1946 independence from France. Landlords overwhelmingly dominated parliament, and the same small group of notable politicians made up the recruitment pool of presidents and cabinet ministers, among whom politics
centered on the rivalry of coalitions over offices and spoils. The newly independent state's effort to consolidate public loyalties was, however, fatally compromised when its legitimacy was shattered by the 1948 loss of Palestine; the resulting discontent was expressed in riots and a succession of military coups that initiated brief military dictatorship, soon removed in countercoups.

At the same time, an indigenous agrarian and industrial capitalist class emerged to drive national development. Investment in uncultivated lands in the eastern al-Jazeera plains, pump-irrigated cotton cultivation in the river valleys, and new agricultural industries sparked an economic boom. This new wealth fed the growth of the state apparatus, army, bureaucracy, and schools, thereby enlarging the salaried and professional middle class. An important stratum of this new class was drawn from the rural towns and the peasantry—many of them of minority background—forming a partly urbanized rural intelligentsia. Of pivotal importance, the army officer corps, which was rapidly expanded to deal with separatist threats and border conflicts with Israel, became a channel of upward mobility (via free admittance to the military academy) for peasant and lower-middle-class youth, while the scions of the upper classes eschewed military careers.

Syria's development soon proved precarious and generated class conflict that radicalized politics. A smoldering landlord-peasant struggle was rooted in Syria's highly inegalitarian "feudal" social structure, with its radical separation between the ownership and cultivation of land: "He who owns does not work, and he who works does not own" was the Syrian saying of the time. A thin stratum of notable families controlled half the land, concentrated in great landed estates. Many medium and small properties were owned by urban merchants or rural notables who did not personally cultivate them, and more than two-thirds of the peasants were landless sharecroppers. Landlord-peasant conflict was ignited when the landlords started replacing traditional sharecropping with mechanization and wage labor, disrupting whole villages and generating a mobile agrarian proletariat.

By the mid-1950s, Syria's laissez-faire capitalist development entered a crisis rooted in a combination of structurally weak peripheral capitalism and rising political instability. After the early burst of "easy" agriculture-based industrialization, the economy suffered a downturn, and further development required a wholly new order of investment, but profits were exported or dissipated through consumption. An unskilled, depressed workforce and a limited market constrained further growth. Many Syrians came to believe that a major role for the state in development and in implementation of land reform was required to drive investment, human development, and market expansion, but the ruling oligarchy resisted. As growth slowed, the very unequal distribution of its benefits and burdens fueled class conflict in strikes for better wages and conditions by the small but unionized working class. The belief became widespread, inspired by increasingly hegemonic leftist discourse, that the capitalist model was exhausted and incompatible with social justice and an independent foreign policy. Indeed, it was the association of Syria's liberal oligarchy with the West at a time of intense nationalist mobilization that explained the ease with which capitalism was delegitimized by radical movements. The bankruptcy of the capitalist model became a self-fulfilling prophecy because the upper class began to disinvest as it lost confidence that it could control political events.

As a result, several radical middle-class parties emerged to contest the power of the oligarchy; of these, the Baath Party eventually became the main political vehicle that overthrew the old regime. The party was founded by two Damascene schoolteachers: Michel Aflaq, a Christian, and Salah ad-Din Bitar, a Sunni. On an eventually merging parallel track were Alawites Zaki Arsuzi, a teacher and refugee from Iskandarun, and Wahib al-Ghanim, a medical doctor from Latakia. The Baath later also merged with Akram al-Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party, which had organized educated youth and peasant tenants to challenge Hama's great feudal magnates. From the outset, the social base of the Baath was lower middle class and rural. Most of its early followers
were peasant youth who came to the city for education. Many of them were from minority communities, notably Alawites, attracted by a secular, nationalist message that accepted minorities as equals. The party acquired special strength in the two professions that were most open to people of modest backgrounds—the army and teaching.9

Baath ideology was a mixture of nationalism and social reformism. It held that imperialism had artificially divided the Arab nation into many states to keep it weak. The mission of the party was to awaken the slumbering Arab nation and lead its unification. It mixed this Pan-Arabism with a call for national renaissance—*ba`th*—to be achieved through the overthrow of the decadence and social injustice of feudal society. The party’s official 1947 program, radical for its time, demanded a major role for the state in national development, social welfare services, labor rights, regulation of private business in the national interest, and agrarian reform. The ideology’s appeal—in particular its ability to bridge the class and sectarian cleavages that divided Syrians—was instrumental in making the Baath Party the most important and ultimately successful of the radical movements that arose in postindependence Syria. The Baath slogan, *wahdah, hurriyah, ishtirakiyah* (Unity, Freedom, Socialism), became the trinity of Arab nationalist politics throughout the Arab world.

Syria’s fragile liberal institutions, though initially oligarchic, might have been democratized by the inclusion of wider class strata within its constitutional system of electoral contestation. Indeed, in the 1954 election, radical middle-class parties, including the Baath, won a minority but high-profile bloc of seats in parliament. At the same time, however, as the officer corps, dominated by the middle class and former peasants, was politicized and radicalized, it turned against the oligarchy. A duality of power emerged between the parliament, still led by landowners, and the army, which was more open to popular recruitment and, hence, more representative. This led to a stalemate, which prevented major reform and fostered instability.

Domestic conflict coincided with perceptions of a rising threat from Israel, as border skirmishes escalated over demilitarized zones left from the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Syria needed a protective alliance, but Syrians were deeply divided between supporters of pro-Western Iraq, which advocated security through membership in the Western-sponsored Baghdad Pact, and followers of Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, who opposed the pact in the name of nonalignment and proposed an Arab collective security pact. Because the fate of the Baghdad Pact was believed to turn on Syria’s choice, a regional and international “struggle for Syria”10 took place (1954–1958). Nasser’s rising stature as a Pan-Arab hero, especially after the Suez War, weakened conservative pro-Western and pro-Iraqi politicians and strengthened those aligned with Cairo—above all, the Baath—which in 1956 helped form an anti-imperialist National Front government. The West’s sponsorship of several abortive conservative coups and a 1957 attempt to quarantine Syrian radicalism under the Eisenhower Doctrine generated a backlash of leftist feeling inside Syria. External siege, internal polarization, and widespread Pan-Arab sentiment led Syrian politicians to seek salvation in a merger with Egypt. Although the United Arab Republic (1958–1961) failed, the oligarchy could not thereafter be restored. In sum, the postindependence rise of middle-class radical nationalism, combined with peasant land hunger, destabilized the semiliberal, postindependence oligarchic regime and paved the way for the Baath coup of 1963.

### Institutions and Governance

#### Formation of the Baath Regime

The coup that brought the Baath Party to power in 1963 initially ushered in an era of instability. Although the coup leaders called it a revolution, the new regime was the product of a conspiracy by a handful of military officers, not of mass mobilization from below. This narrow-based regime, facing the opposition of the old oligarchs, the Muslim Brotherhood, and mass-Nasserist agitation over its failure to reunite Syria and Egypt, was hard put to survive; that it did signified that
it was no ordinary coup: the coup leaders came out of the villages that had experienced the agrarian crisis and political mobilization of the 1950s, and they launched a “revolution from above” in which nationalization of big business and land reform demolished the class power of the old oligarchy, gave the Baath control of the levers of the economy, and allowed it to mobilize a mass constituency. This led to a period of intense class struggle between regime and opposition.

Adding to the instability, the regime was internally split between party patriarch Michel Aflaq, who prioritized Pan-Arab union, and younger minority-dominated radicals more interested in a social “revolution in one country.” In intra-regime struggles, ideological and personal rivalries overlapped with sectarian divisions between Sunnis and the minorities long disproportionately represented in the party and army. Because Alawites increasingly won, thereby disaffecting Syria’s Sunni majority, the regime was pressured to prove its Arab-nationalist credentials. A radical minority-led faction under Salah Jadid seized power in a 1966 intra-party coup.11 Driven by ideological militancy and a search for legitimation, the radicals supported Palestinian fedayeen raids into Israel, in spite of the unfavorable Syrian-Israeli balance of power, thereby provoking the 1967 defeat and Israeli occupation of Syria’s Golan Heights. The recklessness of the radical faction discredited it, allowing the 1970 rise of a newly pragmatic wing of the party under General Hafiz al-Asad.12

Regime Power Structures and Intra-elite Politics

The Syrian Baath regime and the presidency rest on three overlapping pillars of power—the party apparatus, the military-police establishment, and the formal institutions of government, including the Council of Ministers (cabinet). Through these interlocking institutions the top political elite seek to settle intra-elite conflicts and design public policy and, through their command posts, to implement policy and control society. Observers frequently argue that an informal network of actors—a shadow government centered on the security forces—operates behind the scenes of formal institutions.14 Certainly, under Hafiz al-Asad, his trusted network of Alawite military and intelligence officers was the political cement that linked the main regime power centers, presidency, party, and army. Under his son, Bashar, the extended Asad-Makhlouf family exercised great influence. However, the presidency and party did, as institutions, have identifiable political agendas and the capacity to act corporately, and the other state structures—the army, security
forces, cabinet, and bureaucracy—were important as instruments of the elite or arenas for their rivalry. The president is the main source of innovation, holds the legal and political reins of all three pillars of power, and has numerous powers of command, appointment, and patronage. Second only to the presidency in policymaking was the Baath Party’s Regional Command (al-qiyadah al-qutriyah), the top collegial leadership body, roughly divided between senior military commanders, the most powerful cabinet ministers, and top party apparatchiks. It endorses policy initiatives and commands the party apparatus that systematically penetrates other institutions of state and civil society.

Intra-elite politics was played out largely in the relationship between the presidency, party, and security barons. A major test of the regime’s institutions was the succession process at the death of President Hafiz al-Asad in 2000. In the later years of Hafiz’s reign, it was clear he was preparing his son to succeed him, a “dynastic” inheritance of power that was at odds with republican principles and involved shunting aside the close lieutenants through whom Hafiz had governed. Many doubted that the regime’s institutions could provide an orderly transfer of power from rule by the za`im (strongman) who had built the state or prevent an internecine struggle. However, the party and army elite closed ranks and, to prevent a power struggle, confirmed Bashar as the new president. An Asad, Bashar assured the Alawites that he would not betray his father’s heritage. Politically inexperienced, he was not thought to threaten the incumbent elite. Yet among the public, especially the younger generation, he was popular, seen as uncorrupted and a modernizer, and, in fact, he came to power with an agenda to
reform—economically “modernize”—the regime. He represented, therefore, both continuity and change.

Initially, Bashar al-Asad had to share power with the old guard, his father's lieutenants, entrenched security barons, and party apparatchiks; expecting that he govern as first among equals, they were less convinced of the need for economic reform and could veto his initiatives. Not having risen from within the regime, he initially lacked a power base, yet the presidency gave him unmatched powers of appointment with which to establish himself as the prime decision maker. Using these powers, Bashar engineered, within three years of his succession, a transfer of power to a new generation. The presidency became the source of a spate of economic reform proposals, often delayed by the Regional Command but eventually approved by parliament and formally, although in practice often ineffectively, implemented by the Council of Ministers through the state bureaucracy. Gradually, Asad concentrated power in the presidency at the expense of the Regional Command, and at the 2005 Baath Party congress he retired his rivals in the old guard. This narrowed the inner circle of the regime by excluding Sunni notables, including former vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam and some intelligence barons and their private-sector partners, while at the same time promoting younger party members beholden to the president and co-opting new parts of the private sector. In 2007 Bashar was inaugurated for a second seven-year term, his personal power consolidated without resorting to violence and through legal and institutional means. With the old guard retired, overt resistance of the party to the president's initiatives declined, and he was able to shift power to the Council of Ministers, which was more amenable to his reforms.

**Pillars of Power**

The regime maintained multiple intelligence or security services (mukhabarat), housed in the military command and Interior Ministry, whose function was surveillance of possible threats to the regime from external enemies, the opposition, the army, and each other. While they are instruments through which the president controls the other regime power centers, they have significant powers of their own in that they vet all candidates for office and promotion; keep files on everyone's peccadilloes and loyalty; and, since the Islamist insurgency of the 1970s and 1980s, have extra-legal powers. This has allowed top security barons to intervene in party politics and government, becoming powerful political brokers whose support ambitious politicians and prominent businessmen seek. The barons remain loyal to the president because they are allowed to operate parasitic power centers, often involved in smuggling or extorting cuts from businesses. In turn, they co-opt and control large parts of society through semilicit deals and arrangements. The president has, however, periodically removed these barons, when they push their self-aggrandizement too far, and prevents them from establishing fiefdoms outside of his control.

Although subordinated to the presidency, the Baath Party apparatus remained a key pillar of the regime. It consisted of over 11,000 cells (halaqat) located in villages, factories, neighborhoods, and public institutions, grouped into 154 subbranches at the district (mantiqah) or town level, which combine into eighteen branches (furū’) in the provinces (muhafazat), big cities, and major institutions (such as universities). A parallel structure of branches exists inside the army and security services. At the national level, a party congress of some 1,200 delegates has been a main arena in which ideological and later bureaucratic conflicts were compromised, elite turnover engineered, and a stamp of approval given to major new policies. The Congress elects the ninety-member Central Committee, made up of party functionaries, ministers, senior military officers, security barons, governors, heads of syndicates, and university presidents. The committee, in turn, elects the fifteen-member Regional Command. Attached to the command are offices for internal party organization and finance that administer the branches in the regions; military and security bureaus that oversee those in the services; and bureaus for peasants and agriculture, economy, education, workers, and youth—through
which the party controls the wider society. Each central office has a subordinate counterpart at the branch and subbranch levels, constituting a vertical line of command throughout Syria. In 2000 party membership of nearly two million incorporated teachers, students, state employees, peasants, and workers—an overwhelmingly middle- and lower-class constituency. The party also controls syndical organizations, such as the worker, peasant, and professional unions and chambers of commerce and industry. These institutions, which gave the regime roots in society and bridged sectarian and urban-rural gaps, account for its durability; their debilitation in the 2000s, when the president perceived the party as an obstacle to his economic reforms, helps account for the antiregime mobilization of 2011.

The military was another main pillar of the regime. When in 1963 Baath officers brought the party to power, they inevitably became an equal or senior partner in the new military-party state. But Hafiz al-Asad, with a foot in both, became the first Syrian leader to maintain firm control over the army. As legal commander in chief, the president assumed personal control of appointments and dismissals of senior officers. A certain division of labor was established within the military: in presidential guard units or special forces primarily charged with regime defense, appointments were based on political loyalty and (Alawite) sectarian affiliation. Alawite Baath officers also held a disproportionate number of top operational commands, especially of potentially coup-making armored units. The Baath Party’s military organization exercised political control over military members and gave them some voice in party institutions. In the larger army, charged with external defense, a new stress was put on professional competence and discipline, with the professional officer corps represented in the president’s inner circle by men such as longtime chief of staff Hikmat al-Shihabi. The corps was a powerful corporate interest group concerned with the allocation of resources needed to maintain military capabilities. The continued loyalty of the military explains the ability of the regime to survive in the face of mass insurgence throughout 2011.

The weakest pillar of power comprises the formal institutions of the state or government. The Council of Ministers is headed by a prime minister appointed by the president and party leadership. This cabinet of some thirty ministers implements policies of the president and the party. But the bureaucracy that it heads is so unwieldy, subservient to vested interests, and colonized “from below” by local and kin loyalties that its inefficiency and inertia became major obstacles to Bashar al-Asad’s economic reforms. There is no effective separation of powers. The legislative body, the People’s Assembly, merely responds to and normally approves government legislation. Deputies mainly act as brokers between government and their constituents, notably those seeking favors and exceptions to the law. The regime manipulates the composition of the parliament: two-thirds of the seats are reserved for candidates of the National Progressive Front (NPF), the alliance of the Baath Party and small leftist and nationalist parties it tolerates. In order to co-opt elements outside the regime’s state- and rural-centered power base, it allows independent candidates, mostly from the urban bourgeoisie, to contest the remaining one-third of the seats. The judiciary is politicized through party control of appointments. The legal process suffers from corruption and interminable delays in litigation and fails to guarantee rule of law, civil liberties, and property rights. Hence, redress of grievances typically rests on access to informal clientele connections. Judicial reform and independence were widely recognized as were essential to Bashar al-Asad’s reform project.

**Actors and Participation**

Political participation in Syria has taken various forms. During the pre-Baath liberal-oligarchic period, it was shaped by electoral competition, in which big landlords delivered the votes of their dependents, and by street protest and military intervention, through which middle-class actors challenged landlords. During
formation of the Baathist state (1963–1970), ideological conflicts were settled at party congresses and by intra-party military coups. Once Hafiz al-Asad consolidated the regime, “normal” interest politics were funneled through the party and corporatist institutions described above. Space for more exceptional “big issue politics” over the direction of the country opened during periods of crisis such as the failed Islamic revolution (1978–1982) and during the presidential succession, when the transfer of power had to be managed to avoid collapse of the regime and the new president was struggling to establish his authority (2000–2005). In both periods, nonregime actors—Islamists and liberals—sought to reshape Syrian politics with limited 

success. A third major issue of political contestation was the evolution of economic policy which regime politicos, technocrats, and business representatives incrementally adjusted to deal with chronic economic difficulties.

Civil Society, Political Islam

The Baath regime generated its antithesis—political Islam—which reflected the interests and values of the roughly half of Syrian society that was effectively excluded from the Baathist state and its networks. Political Islam was historically concentrated in traditional, urban quarters, where the mosque and the suq (market) came together. From this milieu, politicized ulema (religious scholars) and the Muslim Brotherhood (al-ikhwan al-muslimun), whose members were typically recruited from urban merchant families, mounted the main opposition to the regime. Beginning in the 1960s, as the state takeover of foreign trade and restrictions on imports deprived merchants of business, they denounced Baath socialism as Marxist and, hence, atheist. As the youth of traditional neighborhoods went to university, a growing proportion of Islamist activists came to be drawn from the university educated.

From 1977 to 1982, the Muslim Brotherhood instigated a violent insurrection against the regime. Corruption, sectarian favoritism, Hafiz al-Asad’s 1976 confrontation with the Palestinians in Lebanon, and
Sunni resentment of minority domination generated fertile conditions for Islamist revolution. The Ikhwan attacked the Alawites as unbelievers and, reflecting the urban-centric and antistatist worldview of the suq, denounced the regime's land reform and called for an Islamic economy based on free enterprise. Financed by the aggrieved notability of Hama and Aleppo, the foot soldiers of the insurgency were recruited from the suq and sharia students, primarily from northern cities and towns. Hama was a historic center of Islamic piety, and the great Hamawi families—the Keilanies, Barazis, and Azms—resented the presence of Baath provincial officials in the heart of their preserve and the favor shown surrounding villages they once dominated. By contrast, the Damascene bourgeoisie, enriched by the disproportionate share of public money expended in the capital, remained quiet during the uprising. The Islamist revolution failed, owing to its fragmented and largely unknown leadership and the urban and northern bias of its social base. The regime, backed by its rural base, remained cohesive, and the security apparatus, led by Alawite troops with a stake in regime survival, mounted a repressive campaign of unusual ruthlessness, marked by the 1982 sack of Hama in which an estimated 15,000 to 30,000 people were killed.

With the Ikhwan's supporters jailed and its leaders exiled, Islamist revolution had failed, but a less politicized, less oppositional Islamization from below thereafter proceeded, tolerated by the regime as part of a tacit deal with chastened and moderate Islamists. Asad sought to tame political Islam through an alliance with moderate Sufi Islam, expressed in the appointment of Ahmad Kafatros as Grand Mufti, which enabled the latter to expand his naqshbandiyya Sufi order and his al-Nur institute in Damascus. Muhammad Sa'id al-Buti, who preached a moderate Islam and opposed the attacks on the regime during the Islamist insurgency, was given exceptional access to the media and helped to bridge the gap between it and the Sunni community. Bashar al-Asad continued the strategy of fostering moderate Islam as a counter to both radical Islamists and the secular opposition, resulting in the spread of Islamic schools and charities, conservative attire, and mosque attendance. Islamist intellectuals and businessmen were co-opted into parliament, among them notably the leader of a modernist movement, Shaykh Muhammad Habbash, and recognition was given to the Qubaysi movement that preached Islam among upper-class Damascene women. This largely nonpolitical Islam, concentrating on personal piety, rejecting violence, calling for constructive criticism within the system, and mobilizing around nonpolitical issues such as opposition to liberal reform of Syrian family law, seemed less threatening to the regime.

While the outlook of the ulama, recruited from the suq merchant class, was sharply at odds with Baathist socialism, it was convergent with Bashar's increasingly neoliberal tangent; most clerics, at least in the cities, professed a bourgeois ethic that rejected state intervention in the economy and saw the acquisition of wealth as a sign of God's favor. The ulama were accordingly permitted to manage the Islamic financial institutions allowed by the regime to attract Gulf money. Bashar al-Asad also made a concerted effort to build alliances with the interlocked business and religious elite of formerly oppositionist Aleppo: he appointed the Aleppo mufti Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassun as the new Grand Mufti of Syria, and Aleppo benefited from his alliance with and economic opening to Turkey, which brought in new investment.

Islamists were not, however, politically incorporated. The regime rebuffed Turkish efforts to negotiate the admission of the Muslim Brotherhood to politics, while hints that al-Buti would found a moderate Islamist party were never realized. Rather, accommodation of Islam was paralleled by regime efforts to control it. The regime appointed the senior ulama, such as muftis and imams of the big mosques. It took advantage of the fragmentation of the Islamic public sphere—for example, between Damascus and Aleppo, Sufi orders and their Salafi critics, and conservative imams and modernists—further dividing
them by repressing some and favoring others; those who sought accommodation with the regime by cultivating patrons inside the security forces or Ministry of Waqfs (religious endowments) were accorded the freedom and resources to spread their networks but risked loss of credibility with the public.25

However, as Islamic schools and charities took over some of the state’s education and welfare functions, and as waqfs and Islamic charities were enriched while the regime’s patronage resources declined, the regime sought to regulate Islamic institutions and assume some control over the distribution of zakat (charitable donations). Also, alarmed that it had inadvertently encouraged a more Salafist Islamic current, dangerous to a minority-dominated regime whose legitimacy depended on the hegemony of a secular identity, the regime attempted to reintroduce limits on public displays of piety. However, a mobilization of Islamist leaders forced the regime into a partial retraction and, especially after the 2011 revolt started, into making more concessions. The government’s coming to terms with political Islam initially enhanced stability, but for what is sometimes called a “regime of minorities,” the consequent erosion of secularism carried real dangers that manifested themselves in the Islamic color of much of the 2011 uprising.

Stalled Democratization and Authoritarian Upgrading

When Bashar al-Asad assumed power in Syria in July 2000 there was much optimism about a young president with exposure to Western education who, in his inaugural speech, emphasized his determination to modernize Syria and invited Syrians to engage in constructive criticism of the regime. According to Volker Perthes,26 however, Bashar al-Asad’s project was to “modernize authoritarianism” in Syria. Bashar al-Asad’s reform project required limited political liberalization and more rule of law, but not democratization. He initially hoped to liberalize politics, at least to the extent this would help legitimize his position and advance economic reform. The secular liberal and largely loyal opposition wanted a democratic transformation but sought to advance it gradually, banking on Bashar’s modernizers against the old guard. The Damascus Spring of 2000–2001, when Bashar encouraged civil society to express constructive criticism as a way to strengthen his reformist agenda, suggested that a coalition between modernizers and the loyal opposition was possible.27 Centered in the professional classes, the opposition suffered from fragmentation, resource scarcity, and isolation from mass society, and Bashar al-Asad could readily have co-opted much of it to initiate a “pacted transition” to a more pluralistic and resilient “hybrid” regime. But when hardline opposition figures framed political change in zero-sum terms by attacking the legacy of Hafiz and spotlighting the corruption of regime barons, regime hardliners were strengthened, and Bashar shut down his political liberalization experiment.28 Western democracy,
he asserted, could not just be imported; democratization had to follow social and economic modernization, as in China, not precede it, lest instability ensue as it had in Mikhail Gorbachev’s Russia. There were also several structural obstacles to such a “democratization from above.” The minority Alawite elite feared sectarian voting (as in Iraq) would allow the Sunni majority to drive it from power. Even regime reformers believed economic reforms would be blocked if the masses were empowered by the vote; indeed, the first stages of Bashar’s economic reform program meant a rollback in the populist social contract and a stage of crony capitalism. This was incompatible with the regime winning a free election and could only be sustained by authoritarian power. Demand for democratization was concentrated in a limited number of middle-class intellectuals and a minority of the private bourgeoisie who were deeply divided. The Muslim Brotherhood had the best potential to mobilize mass support but was mistrusted by many because of the violence of the rebellion it led in the 1980s and its dubious democratic credentials. Additionally, the chaos and sectarian conflict in Iraq, and the fear—ignited by Kurdish riots in 2004 and the rise of Islamist militancy—that democratization would spread the “Iraqi disease” to Syria, led the public to put a high premium on stability. This generated for the regime what might be called “legitimacy because of a worse alternative.” The continuing struggle over Palestine and the Golan also allowed the regime to justify a national security state. That demands for democratization nevertheless escalated into an attempted revolution from below in 2011–2012 can only be fully grasped via the following account of the regime’s economic and foreign policies.

As a substitute for democratization, Asad embarked on a process of “authoritarian upgrading,” the fostering of alternative constituencies to substitute for the alliance with workers and peasants the regime was abandoning and that could be balanced against each other. The regime co-opted a new alliance of reforming technocrats and the business class, a powerful social force that, dependent as it was on the state for opportunities (contracts, licenses) and for disciplining the working class and rolling back populism, had no interest in a democratization that could empower the masses to block economic liberalization. The new rich and the urban middle class were encouraged to develop their own civil society organizations, such as junior chambers of commerce, and several government-sponsored NGOs were encouraged by the first lady; in this way the second generation of educated, business elements spawned by the regime were incorporated, and other “modern” elements that might otherwise have pressed for democratization were co-opted. However, and especially given the incompatibility of the Baath Party with economic reform, Asad could have further strengthened his position by permitting the formation of a new bourgeois party, as other Arab rulers did in parallel to their abandonment of populism.

At the same time, to appease the urban middle class, Asad allowed a certain political decompression, which further reduced the barrier of fear constructed by Hafiz at the time of the 1980s Islamic rebellion. Enhanced freedom of expression in arts enterprises sponsored by regime-connected businessmen co-opted potential political activists into production of well-paid entertainment cinema for the Gulf market. Critics of the regime were treated more leniently, even encouraged to voice constructive criticism, albeit within boundaries highlighted by episodic instances of selective repression. This was meant to provide a safety valve for discontent; but it also increased consciousness of abuses without opening any institutionalized channels of redress. Similarly, the introduction of the Internet and mobile telephones was seen by Asad, who had been president of the Syrian Computer Society, as an essential tool of economic modernization, which the regime also used to mobilize supporters and legitimize itself. But these moves also gave political activists the ability to build networks, overcome atomization, and publicize abuses; they paved the way for the 2011 uprising.
Political Economy

Baath Populist Statism (1963–2000)

The Baath regime carried out a “revolution from above” that effected a significant redistribution of economic assets through land reform and the nationalization of industry, banks, and other big businesses. The revolution opened education and public employment to the lower strata and established welfare entitlements, including labor rights and food subsidies. Formerly rigid class lines were broken, unleashing substantial social mobility.30

There was a major transformation of the countryside through land redistribution, irrigation, and land reclamation works; the spread of education, health care, and electrification; and the subsidization of agriculture, which increased incomes and opportunities for rural residents. Greater rural social equality did not preclude a more productive agricultural sector, owing to the bolstering of small peasants through cooperatives and rural services and the need of landlords to improve production in order to maintain incomes from much-reduced post–land reform holdings. This considerably mitigated the historic urban-rural gap, although rural poverty remained a fact of life.31

The economy significantly expanded in the 1970s, as the state channeled investment and substantial foreign aid from the East bloc and Arab oil producers into factories, railways, dams, and irrigation projects in an effort at statist import-substitute industrialization (ISI). By the mid-1980s, however, the exhaustion of Baath statism was apparent in balance-of-payment and foreign exchange crises and a chronic savings-investment gap, reflective of the failure of the public sector to accumulate capital. This was because of systemic corruption, massive military spending, inefficiencies in public-sector management, the general subordination of economic rationality to political imperatives, and the overdevelopment of the state relative to its economic base. Meanwhile, the private sector, confined after the nationalization of big business to small-scale enterprises, failed to invest, and the rich exported their capital. Syria’s industry stagnated and proved unable to move beyond the middle stages of ISI. The economy became excessively dependent on petroleum revenues, worker remittances, and transfers to families from Syrians living abroad.32

The regime responded to the weaknesses of statism with three waves of liberalization—in the early 1970s, late 1980s, and early 1990s, resulting in an ever-greater role for the private sector, which the state increasingly accepted as a partner in development. In fact, its share of investment and GDP exceeded that of the public sector in the 1990s. Economic liberalization generated a new “military-merchant complex” at the heart of the regime as senior regime stalwarts, notably Alawite military and security officers, went into business with Sunni private-sector partners, who were mostly rent seekers exploiting their connections with the state. In time, as the sons of the elite went into business, their intermarriage and business partnerships with the private business class generated a new upper class, which partly bridged old sectarian divides. Parallel to the emergence of the new rich, mounting inflation threatened the livelihoods of the publicly employed middle class, and class distinctions became greater.33

Resistance to a full transition to a market economy came from the institutionalization of populism in the ruling party and the “social contract” under which citizens surrendered political rights in return for state provision of subsidized food, public jobs, and farm support prices. The ability of the regime to buy loyalty through patronage dispensed to core supporters would have been risked by withdrawal of the state from the economy. Sustained liberalization required reconstruction of an entrepreneurial bourgeoisie, which, willing to invest, could provide a viable alternative to the public sector as a source of jobs and taxes. But the old bourgeoisie was politically opposed to the regime; newer elements were largely commercial and rent seeking; all evaded taxes; and capital was largely exported in the absence of investor confidence, which
required bridging the historic political gap between the state and the bourgeoisie. This would require greater rule of law, policies favoring investors over labor, and ameliorating the ongoing conflicts in Syria's regional environment. Rent windfalls—oil revenues and Arab aid—and bursts of investment following unsustained liberalization temporarily relieved pressure for reform. Rent and relative lack of debt to the West buffered the regime from IMF-imposed structural adjustment.

Postpopulist “Reform” under Bashar al-Asad (2000–)

Bashar al-Asad's reform project was arguably one of “modernizing authoritarianism”—reviving the regime's ability to promote development and, hence, survive in a new environment of declining rent and the globalization of capitalism. Several imperatives imparted new urgency to reform: since the 1980s, GDP per capita stagnated, as economic growth barely kept up with population growth and resulted in burgeoning youth unemployment. Revenues from petroleum exports, which had funded half the state budget, began a seemingly inexorable decline at the end of the 1990s.

A new consensus emerged in the regime that private capital investment was the only solution to the exhaustion of Syria's statist economy, provision of jobs, profits, and taxes. Baath Party apparatchiks gradually lost power to new, liberalizing technocrats that Bashar recruited to ministerial office. They were men with Western advanced degrees in economics and engineering who favored Syria's integration into the world economy. Baath ideology no longer governed economic policy, and the regime looked instead to the “Chinese model,” a dual-track approach through which the market is introduced, while the state-dominated system, including populist welfare measures, is downsized only gradually in order to avoid social instability. This shift in strategy was legitimized by the 2005 Baath Party conference as a transition to a “social-market” economy. Actual policy measures were driven by two partly conflicting imperatives: to stimulate growth through private investment, which meant prioritizing the needs of investors, and, with the decline of oil revenues, to improve Syria's dismal 10 percent tax-to-GDP ratio, which required ending widespread tax evasion by the private sector at the expense of the public sector and its employees. The regime had to simultaneously encourage private investors and extract a share of their profits for the treasury.

A multitude of new laws were designed to restrict the interference of the party and security forces in economic administration, create the legal framework for a more market-oriented economy, and reinforce property rights. Other investor-friendly measures included opening private banks and insurance companies, liberalization of trade and foreign exchange, and reduction in tax rates. Since the 1990s, private companies were permitted in virtually all fields, although they still required nontransparent official approval. Capital could now be repatriated; foreign banks could wholly finance projects; and labor laws were relaxed. Under the 2006 Index of Economic Freedom, Syria was ranked 145 out of 157 countries, but reflective of the incremental deepening of marketization, it jumped to 91 in 2008.

Many reforms, however, went wholly or partially unimplemented. The elimination of the main opposing old guard did not eliminate the inertia and hostility of the underqualified, poorly motivated bureaucracy charged with carrying out reform. Because, according to the president, the major constraint on implementation was the absence of efficient, trained cadres and technical expertise, his priority was educational reform and recruitment of qualified people into his administration. Just as important, however, were the vested and corrupt interests that obstructed or perverted the reforms. Bashar did not curtail the new class of “crony capitalists”—the rent-seeking alliances of political brokers led by his mother's family, the Makhloufs, and the regime-supportive bourgeoisie—whose stranglehold on the economy deterred investment by more productive entrepreneurs; on the contrary, the regime understood that it could only survive a transition from a statist to
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a market economy if it created its own fraction of the emerging capitalist class. Arguably, in this effort it went too far, with regime cronies crowding out much of the Sunni business class, at least from the lucrative sectors of the economy such as telecommunications, and even demanding a share in smaller businesses as a quid pro quo for the official permissions businesses required to operate.

The role of the state in the economy also remained substantial. The public sector remained the main economic stimulator through its investment budget. The three key productive sectors of the economy—agriculture, energy, and industry—remained state dominated. The public industrial sector was not privatized, although the regime did experiment with contracting the public sector’s management to private firms, a privatization by stealth in the view of critics. Because the public sector also supplied contracts and intermediate goods at low cost to the private sector, their relationship was symbiotic.

The new political economy did not immediately translate into sustained economic growth. Average growth of gross national product (GNP) was only 3 percent between 2000 and 2006, barely above population growth. After 2004 a spurt of investment due to excess liquidity in the Gulf from the oil price boom and Syria’s improved business climate drove a private-sector boom in trade, housing, banking, construction, and tourism. But the failure to invest in significant job-creating enterprises severely limited the trickle-down effects. This, plus the continued stagnation of industry and the still-rudimentary capacity for industrial exports, suggests Syria was slipping into the Dubai model of consumer services for the rich, rather than the Chinese model.

Socioeconomic inequality steadily increased. While the new bourgeoisie was enriched, the failure of official salaries to keep up with inflation since the 1980s impoverished the salaried middle class, and public-sector workers normally had to work multiple jobs. A 2005 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) study found 30 percent of Syrians lived near the official poverty line, and unemployment was estimated at close to 18 percent. To be sure, agriculture support prices helped peasants, and the subsidization of basic consumption commodities, such as bread, provides a safety net of sorts for town dwellers. But the government started reducing subsidies, especially on fuel products that encouraged smuggling to neighboring countries at the expense of the treasury. The free basic health care and education, which were instituted by the revolution, were deprioritized under austerity budgets and sharply deteriorated. This pushed those able to pay to rely on private medicine and send their children to new Syrian private universities the regime encouraged. Syria’s still-rising scores on the Human Development Index (HDI), which improved from 0.580 in 1980 to 0.691 in 2000, with life expectancy about seventy years and the literacy rate at 76 percent, reflected a momentum from earlier achievements that was unlikely to be sustained. The country still ranked 108 out of 173 countries on the HDI, with an official per capita annual income of approximately $4,800, although this figure does not adequately capture the enormous informal economy.

The Syrian Uprising of 2011–2012

The seeds of the Syrian uprising can be seen in the “authoritarian upgrading” by which Bashar al-Asad sought to fix the vulnerabilities of the regime he inherited from his father. Upgrading had its costs and contradictions as well as its advantages. The root of the regime’s problems was that its survival needed both nationalist legitimacy and money but, as oil revenues were set to be exhausted, the latter depended on inward investment; yet the regime’s nationalist foreign policy, although winning domestic support, brought on economic isolation from the West, the main source of capital. This drove regime efforts to find alternative sources of revenues, via tax cuts, and currency and trade liberalization, designed to attract expatriate capital and surplus liquidity from the Gulf. The drive to evade isolation and access resources meant that the
ideal of a social market economy was sidelined and the actual policy of Bashar’s reforming technocrats was little distinguishable from neoliberalism, with its priority on capital accumulation and growth to the neglect of equality and distribution. The removal of subsidies on agricultural inputs, decline of farm support prices, and neglect of the system of agricultural planning and cooperatives, whose underpaid officials demanded bribes for their services, combined with the terrible drought of 2007 to 2009, led to agricultural decline. Poor neighborhoods around the cities burgeoned with the influx of drought victims and Iraqi refugees. In parallel, the urban real-estate speculation unleashed by the influx of Gulf capital, together with an end to rent controls conceded to the bourgeoisie, drove the cost of housing beyond the means of the middle strata; families who had lived in low-rent properties for decades became homeless while state-owned land was sold cheaply to investors, making it less available for low-cost housing. The resultant housing crisis was depicted as a “time bomb” waiting to go off—which it did. The conspicuous consumption of the new urban rich was at odds with Syrian traditions and alienated those in the surrounding deprived suburbs. The president was warned that the people perceived the state to be “abandoning the poor for the sake of the rich.” Free trade agreements ending tariff protection devastated small manufacturers in the suburbs. Conspicuous consumption by the new crony capitalists alienated the victims of postpopulism.

In parallel, to advance his postpopulism reforms, Asad concentrated power in the presidency in an extended struggle with an old guard. In uprooting these barons, he reduced obstacles to his reforms but also weakened powerful interests with clientele networks that incorporated key segments of society into the regime. This shrunk the scope of elites incorporated into the regime, making the president overdependent on the presidential family, Alawi security barons, and technocrats lacking bases of support. The overconcentration of patronage, opportunities, and corruption in the hands of the presidential family and the narrowing of loyalties from party to family core is a dangerous move for authoritarian regimes. Also, seeing the party apparatus and the worker and peasant unions as obstacles to economic reform, Asad debilitated them; this was very dangerous, since they were the regime’s organized connection to its rural and Sunni constituency, without which its social base shrunk, becoming more minoritarian and more upper class. As the party’s penetration of neighborhoods and villages declined, citizens who would once have gone to local party or union officials for redress or access increasingly approached tribal, sectarian, or religious notables. In short, seeking to consolidate power within the regime he inherited, Asad unwittingly weakened its capacity to sustain his power over society. Parallel to this, authoritarian upgrading fostered alternative constituencies, mostly in the big cities. The new rich and the urban middle class were encouraged to develop their own civil society organizations. The regime co-opted big segments of the business class and ulama, traditional centers of opposition to the Baath; the offloading of welfare responsibilities to the private charities controlled by the latter helped co-opt them.

As Bassam Haddad anticipated, the one thing that could spread the Arab uprising to Syria was an overreaction by the security forces, and this happened—starting in Dera. Had the regime avoided provoking the population or had Asad reacted with democratic concessions instead of repression, he might have won a free election as a reformer. Given the minority core of the regime, however, he could not afford to make sufficient democratic concessions, especially when the debilitation of its former cross-sectarian base was making it a sectarian-family regime.

The uprising took the form of a protracted conflict because there were enough grievances to fuel an uprising among a plurality of the population, while another minority adhered to the regime as a better alternative than civil war, and a majority stayed on the sidelines. The uprising was geographically concentrated outside the capital, beginning in the rural peripheries and then spreading to small towns, suburbs, and medium-sized cities. It took a distinctly Sunni Islamic character.
Centers of grievances were mixed areas where Alawis and Sunni lived together, as in Latakia, Banias, and Homs. On the other hand, Damascus and Aleppo, where the main beneficiaries of postpopulism and co-optation were concentrated, remained under control. What the opposition had hoped to provoke—a split in the regime or army—had not happened a year into the insurgency. While the uprising is essentially indigenous, the opposition strategy was always to get external constraints on regime repression—or, failing that, intervention; and external forces increasingly sought to use it to their advantage.

**Regional and International Politics**

Syria’s foreign policy is shaped by geography and history, by vulnerabilities and grievances. The country has always suffered from a sense of insecurity, exposed on three sides to stronger countries that, at one time or another, have constituted threats. Its relatively small size and population provide a limited manpower base and strategic depth, and it is mostly unprotected by natural boundaries. Iraq had designs on Syria, and Turkey has, at times, pressured Damascus through control of the water of the Euphrates River, which runs through both countries. Grievances originating in the dismemberment of historic Syria produced an Arab nationalism that brought conflict with a militarily stronger Israel, with which Syria has fought several wars (1948, 1967, 1973, and 1982). Only under Hafiz al-Asad did Syria turn from a victim into an actor in regional politics.


The struggle with Israel has always been at the center of Syrian foreign policy, but only under Hafiz al-Asad did Syria become a credible actor in it. He scaled down Syria’s goals to fit the constraints of geopolitics: Syria’s goal was recovering the Arab lands occupied by Israel in 1967, above all the Golan Heights, and achieving Palestinian statehood, notably in the West Bank and Gaza, as part of a comprehensive peace under UN Resolution 242. While Asad’s core aim was the recovery of Syria’s territorial loss, the pull of Arab identity could be seen in his eschewal for a quarter-century of a separate settlement with Israel at the expense of the Palestinians. Second, Asad significantly upgraded Syria’s capabilities. Convinced that Israel would never withdraw from the occupied territories unless military action upset the post-1967 status quo, his main aim after coming to power in 1970 was preparation for a conventional war to retake the Golan. To rebuild the shattered Syrian army, he maintained Syria’s alliance with the Soviet Union to secure arms and allied with Arab oil states to finance his military buildup; alliance with Sadat’s Egypt, the most militarily powerful Arab state, which shared Syria’s interest in regaining the occupied territories, was necessary to take on a more powerful Israel.

Egypt and Syria went to war with Israel in 1973 to recover their occupied territories. The limited nature of Syria’s aims was evident when Syrian forces, advancing into the Golan, made no attempt to continue into Israel. Syria failed to recover the Golan militarily, but Asad sought to use the political leverage from the credible challenge to Israel and the simultaneous Arab oil embargo to get international pressure on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories. Henry Kissinger’s mediation of the Golan Heights disengagement negotiations resulted in a 1974 agreement expected to be the first step in total Israeli withdrawal. However, Sadat’s subsequent separate deals with Israel undermined Syrian diplomatic leverage and shattered the Syro-Egyptian alliance needed to coerce Israel into a comprehensive settlement. Thereafter, for Damascus, the threat of an Israel emboldened by the neutralization of its southern front had to be contained, and the resumption of peace negotiations depended on restoration of the Arab-Israeli power balance.

Syria’s 1976 Lebanon intervention was part of Asad’s attempt to construct a Syrian sphere of influence to substitute for the collapsing alliance with Sadat’s Egypt and to contain Israel’s new advantage on its northern borders. Syria had always viewed Lebanon as a lost part of Greater Syria that should serve its
Arab strategy. The intervention was meant to head off immediate threats: a defeat of the Maronite Christians could push them into Israel’s embrace; emergence of a radical Palestinian-dominated Lebanon could give Israel an excuse to intervene militarily, possibly seize southern Lebanon, and threaten Syria’s soft western flank. Intervention allowed Asad to station his army in the Bekaa Valley against this danger. Later, when the Maronites allied with Israel, Syria tilted toward Palestinian forces confronting Israel in southern Lebanon.\textsuperscript{41} Asad also sought, via the intervention, to control the Lebanon-based PLO, hence the "Palestine card": Syria’s bargaining leverage would be greatly enhanced if it could veto any settlement of the Palestinian problem that left Syria out and overcome rejectionist Palestinian resistance to an acceptable settlement.

Just as Egypt withdrew from the Arab-Israeli power balance, the 1979 Islamic revolution transformed Iran from a friend of Israel and the United States into a fiercely anti-Zionist state and potential Syrian ally. When Iraq attacked Iran, Asad condemned the invasion as the wrong war against the wrong enemy, which would divide and divert the Arabs from the Israeli menace. His stand with Iran was vindicated after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when the dramatic effectiveness of the Iranian-sponsored Islamist resistance to Israel helped foil a mortal threat to Syria.

In parallel to the alliance-making needed to balance Israeli power, Asad also undertook a major military buildup from the late 1970s, using the Arab aid Syria received as the main remaining frontline state. He aimed to attain enough deterrent parity with Israel to minimize the risks of asymmetric warfare using proxies such as Palestinian and later Hizballah guerrillas. Constant, low-level conflict on Israel’s Lebanese border was a tactic designed to show Israel it could not have peace without a settlement with Syria. Such leverage over Israel was critical to peace negotiations, since Asad was unwilling to bargain from a position of weakness that would require concessions of principle. When the balance was unfavorable, he preferred to wait until it improved while obstructing schemes to draw other Arab parties into partial, separate settlements with Israel that circumvented Syria. Thus, he took great risks to obstruct the 1983 Lebanese-Israeli accord in defiance of U.S. and Israeli power.\textsuperscript{42}

Asad’s support for the Western-led war coalition in the 1990–1991 Gulf war following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait was driven by multiple considerations of realpolitik. Saddam Hussein had made himself a considerable nuisance for Asad, notably by supporting challenges to Syria’s position in Lebanon, and were he to succeed in annexing Kuwait, his capacity to seek revenge for Syria’s stand with Iran in the Iran-Iraq War would have been enhanced. Adhesion to the Western coalition led to U.S. and Israeli tolerance of Asad’s further military intervention in Lebanon and consolidation of a Pax Syriana. Standing with Saudi Arabia in the conflict also reopened the channel of Gulf oil-state subsidies that had dried up with the decline of oil prices, and it enabled Syria to resituate itself in a renewed Cairo-Damascus-Riyadh axis.

Ultimately, however, Syria’s policy was shaped most decisively by the breakdown of the bipolar world. By the 1990s, with the loss of the Soviet Union as a reliable protector and arms supplier, Syria could no longer credibly threaten war against Israel in the absence of an acceptable peace. Syria’s struggle with Israel henceforth would have to take a chiefly diplomatic form that would require détente with the United States, which alone had leverage over Israel. Asad needed to get the United States to accept Syria as the key to peace and stability in the Middle East, and the war presented an opportunity to trade membership in the anti-Iraq U.S. coalition—whose credibility Syria’s Arab nationalist credentials arguably enhanced—for U.S. promises to broker an acceptable Arab-Israeli settlement after the war.\textsuperscript{43}

Hafiz entered the U.S.-brokered Madrid peace process in the early 1990s and later bilateral negotiations with Israel. Initially he aimed to minimize the normalization of relations and security concessions that Israel expected in return for the Golan. Yet, once Israel signaled its willingness to return the territory, Syria signaled its willingness to open diplomatic
relations after a settlement and to accept demilitarization of the Golan. The two sides came very close to a settlement, but Israel’s demands to keep its surveillance station on Mount Hermon, 5 percent of the Golan, and control of the Sea of Galilee led to collapse of the negotiations in 2000.

**Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Asad (2000– )**

Bashar al-Asad came to power in the same year as the collapse of the peace process with Israel. His legitimacy was contingent on his faithfulness to the standard of national honor defended by his father, namely the full recovery of the Golan from Israel, but he inherited a deteriorating strategic situation. A new Turkish-Israeli alliance potentially put Damascus in a pincer while in Lebanon he faced opposition to Syrian forces remaining in the country following Israel’s withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. After the 1990s collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria lost its protector and could no longer maneuver between rival global superpowers. Without its arms supplier, Syria could not sustain the conventional military balance with Israel, and

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**FIGURE 23.3**

THE PEACE PROCESS BETWEEN SYRIA AND ISRAEL: A CHRONOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event/Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948–1949</td>
<td>War in Palestine; Syrian irregulars and, later, regular forces participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Israeli attack on Syrian border positions</td>
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<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Suez War; Syria blows up oil pipeline from Iraq</td>
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<tr>
<td>1965–1966</td>
<td>Jordan River waters dispute with Israel; Syrian-backed Palestinian guerrillas raid Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUNE 1967</td>
<td>Third Arab-Israeli war; Israel occupies Syrian Golan Heights</td>
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<tr>
<td>OCTOBER 1973</td>
<td>Fourth Arab-Israeli war: Syria fails to recover Golan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAY 1974</td>
<td>Henry Kissinger brokers Syrian-Israeli disengagement on the Golan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Israel “annexes” Golan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Israeli invasion of Lebanon; major clashes with Syrian troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Syria foils Israeli-Lebanese peace accord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JULY 1991</td>
<td>Syria enters Madrid peace negotiations with Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEPTEMBER 1993</td>
<td>Oslo accord between PLO and Israel threatens to isolate Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JANUARY 1994</td>
<td>Asad-Clinton meeting reinvigorates Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations</td>
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<tr>
<td>MARCH 1996</td>
<td>Turkish-Israeli alliance announced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAY 1996</td>
<td>Likud election victory in Israel dims Syrian-Israeli peace prospects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Election of Ehud Barak in Israel revives Syrian-Israeli peace prospects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Asad-Clinton meeting marks breakdown of Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Syria openly opposes U.S. invasion of Iraq; Israeli airstrike near Damascus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Syria backs Hizballah during Hizballah-Israeli war in Lebanon</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>Turkish-brokered indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel fail</td>
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a growing technological and airpower gap opened between the two countries.

Bashar al-Asad’s first response to this situation was to try to construct multiple alliances through which pressures on Syria might be diluted. At the global level, he sought a strategic opening to Europe and, with increasing urgency as friction increased with the United States, he negotiated Syrian membership in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. At the regional level, Syria initially remained in loose alliance with Saudi Arabia and Egypt; Bashar improved relations with Turkey and in 2001 started an opening to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq—a move, however, that started Syria down a path of conflict with the United States.

Bashar pursued an ambiguous policy toward Israel, reflective of his dual nationalist and modernizing impulses. Upon assuming power, he affirmed that Syria was willing to resume peace negotiations if Israel acknowledged Yitzhak Rabin’s commitment to a full withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, borders on the Golan. But thereafter, the rise of Ariel Sharon to power in Israel pushed a settlement off the agenda, and Sharon’s repression of the Palestinian intifada inflamed Syrian opinion against Israel. Bashar, therefore, revived Syrian militancy toward Israel to consolidate his power internally and send the message to Israel that it could not enjoy a peaceful environment while occupying Arab territory. He now insisted a Syrian-Israeli settlement had to be part of a comprehensive one that included a Palestinian state and allowed Hamas and Islamic Jihad to maintain offices in Syria. He also supported Hizballah operations against Israeli forces in Shabaa Farms, a disputed enclave in southern Lebanon. Given the strategic imbalance with Israel, Syria now relied on “nonconventional” deterrence strategies—Hizballah’s asymmetric warfare capability and Syrian missiles with chemical warheads—but Israel still made several limited retaliatory strikes on Syrian positions. Syria made massive arms deliveries to Hizballah during its summer 2006 conflict with Israel, thereby helping deprive Israel of a military victory in Lebanon. But Bashar also pursued Turkish-brokered peace talks with Israel, which were aborted by Israel’s 2009 attack on Gaza.

In parallel to bad relations with Israel, Syrian-U.S. relations dramatically declined with the rise to power, inside the George W. Bush administration, of the “neoconservatives,” hardliners linked to the Israeli right-wing Likud Party. After 9/11, Bush announced that all states not with the United States in the “war on terror” were foes, but Syria objected to U.S. designation of what it regarded as national liberation movements—Palestinian militants and Hizballah—as terrorists. It regarded these groups as “cards” in its struggle with Israel and evaded U.S. demands that it cease its support of them. Syrian-U.S. relations further worsened as Syria helped Iraq to evade UN sanctions by reopening the closed oil pipeline between the two states, gaining the Syrian treasury a badly needed windfall of a billion dollars yearly, which, however, defied the Bush administration’s attempt to keep Iraq isolated. The immediate catalyst of a crisis in U.S.-Syrian relations was the U.S. determination to invade Iraq. At the UN and in the Arab League, Syrian diplomats attempted to build a coalition to block or at least withhold legitimation of an invasion. When the United States invaded Iraq, Asad, riding the tide of anti-American fury that swept Syria, allowed the movement of Arab resistance fighters across Syria’s border with Iraq and gave refuge to Baath officials fleeing Iraq. Bashar al-Asad’s defiance of Washington over the war, in striking contrast to the appeasement of other Arab leaders, reflected Syria’s Arab nationalist identity rather than a strict calculus of the regime’s best interest. There were many incentives for Syria to acquiesce to the invasion. Opposing it gave the movement of Arab resistance fighters across Syria’s border with Iraq and gave refuge to Baath officials fleeing Iraq. Bashar al-Asad’s defiance of Washington over the war, in striking contrast to the appeasement of other Arab leaders, reflected Syria’s Arab nationalist identity rather than a strict calculus of the regime’s best interest. There were many incentives for Syria to acquiesce to the invasion. Opposing it gave the neocons the opportunity to cast Syria as a U.S. foe. In the first U.S.-Iraq war of 1990, Hafiz al-Asad had been rewarded for siding with the United States with control of Lebanon, which Bashar lost after opposing the United States in 2003. Had circumstances been similar, Bashar probably would also have jumped on the bandwagon with the United States, but they were
not. Whereas in 1990 Hafiz had a U.S. commitment to vigorous pursuit of the peace process, in 2003 no such offer was on the table. And whereas in 1990 Iraq was the aggressor against another Arab state, Kuwait, in this instance, an Arab state was the victim, as Syrians saw it, of aggression by an imperialist power. Indeed, Syrian public opinion was so inflamed against the invasion that regime legitimacy dictated opposition, and this was a more important consideration for Bashar’s still unconsolidated rule than was the case for Hafiz in 1990.

In the wake of the U.S. triumph over Saddam Hussein, the United States presented Damascus with a list of nonnegotiable demands that threatened Syria’s vital interests: to end support for Palestinian militants, dismantle Hizballah, withdraw from Lebanon, and cooperate with the occupation of Iraq—in short, to give up its cards in the struggle over the Golan, its sphere of influence in the Levant, and its Arab nationalist stature in the Arab world. The regime sought to steer a middle way between unrealistic defiance of U.S. power and surrender to its demands, seeking, indeed, to bargain with Washington: Damascus could either advance or obstruct U.S. interests, given its status as key to settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, its ability to restrain or unleash Hizballah, and its ability to contribute to the stabilization or destabilization of Iraq—all depending on whether Washington respected its interests. Syria also actually ended overt support for the resistance in Iraq. But it was U.S. “imperial overreach” that ultimately gave Syria a certain space for maneuver between defiance and submission. However, the cost of defiance was U.S. economic sanctions that obstructed aspects of the regime’s economic liberalization by discouraging Western banks and companies from doing business in Syria.

Syria’s role in Lebanon now became an issue of conflict with the West. The United States and France, in the perception of Damascus, set out in 2004 to deprive Syria of its influence in Lebanon. Washington’s motive was to punish Syria for its opposition to the United States in Iraq, and France wanted to replace Syria as the dominant power in Lebanon. They engineered UN Security Council Resolution 1559 calling on Syria to withdraw from the country, to which Syria reluctantly submitted. After the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, they also had an international tribunal set up to investigate Syria’s role in it, which was seen by Damascus as a Western tool of regime change in Syria. After Syrian withdrawal, Lebanon became a battleground in a wider struggle for the Middle East, between the United States and pro-Western Saudi Arabia and Syria’s Lebanese ally Hizballah backed by Syria and Iran, with the outcome expected to affect the parallel struggles in Iraq and Palestine. The deadlock in Lebanon between pro- and anti-Syrian forces was finally broken in May 2008 when Hizballah demonstrated its power by taking over West Beirut; this led to the Doha agreement on the formation of a national unity government headed by neutral (or even Syria-friendly) president Michel Suleiman and a coalition cabinet in which Hizballah could veto policy.

A major consequence of Syria’s stands in the Iraq and Lebanon conflicts was a shift in regional alignments, as Syria was thereby estranged from its traditional Arab partners, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Bashar was highly critical of their acquiescence in the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and they, in turn, blamed Syria and Iran for the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war. The Saudis also blamed Syria for the assassination of their longtime ally, Hariri. By 2006, Syria had become involved in a battle for the Middle East between what some saw as two axes—a “moderate” one led by the United States and backed by the EU, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, with Israel an unofficial partner, and another led by Iran and Syria, aligned with Hizballah and Hamas, which stood for Arab nationalist and Islamist resistance to the United States and Hizballah. As Syria faced isolation in the West as a “pariah” state, its links with Iran and other members of the “radical” axis strengthened, but Damascus, at the same time, also drew close to Turkey.
By this time, formerly hostile Turkish-Syrian relations had turned amicable. Conflict between the two states in the 1990s had turned on the distribution of Euphrates River water and the Kurds. Under Hafiz, Syria supported the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) to pressure Turkey to give it a greater share of water controlled by new Turkish upstream dams. In the mid-1990s, Turkey and Israel joined in opposition to Syria and Iran. Turkey’s 1996 military threats caused Syria to abandon its support for the PKK and, thereafter, Turkey-Syria relations warmed. The empowerment of the Kurds in Iraq with the U.S.-Iraq wars of 1990–1991 and 2003 gradually drove Turkey and Syria closer over the shared threat of Kurdish separatism. Turkey refused U.S. demands to isolate Syria and even brokered Syria-Israel peace negotiations in defiance of the United States. By the end of 2008, Bashar had outlasted his main nemesis, George W. Bush, and was enjoying closer relations with Western Europe, and a cautious improvement in relations with the United States under the new administration of Barack Obama. However, the 2011 uprising in Syria was seized on by Asad’s enemies as an opportunity to overthrow his regime and thus break the “Resistance Axis” that linked Syria with Iran and Hizballah.

As a result of the uprising, a new “struggle for Syria,” reminiscent of that of the 1950s, was precipitated. Syria is a pivotal Arab state, and when it is united, as under Hafiz al-Asad, it becomes a regional player able to punch well above its weight; when it is divided, as in the uprising, it becomes an arena for the struggle of external forces, all seeking to shift, through it, the regional balance of power in their favor. At stake in this case, as in 1950, were relations with the West—specifically, the balance between the pro-Western Sunni axis, led by Saudi Arabia, and the Shi’i-leavened “Resistance Axis,” especially after Syrian opposition spokesman Burhan Ghalloun said a post-Asad government would break with Iran and Hizballah.

The Syrian uprising was essentially indigenous, but external forces sought to use it to their advantage. Qatar used al-Jazeera to amplify the uprising from the outset while the Saudis funneled money and arms to the tribes and, with the United States, smuggled into the country sophisticated mobile phones (reputedly provided by an Emirati prince) that bypassed Syrian controls. In November, Qatar and Saudi Arabia took the initiative in prompting the Arab League into unprecedented moves to isolate Syria, aimed, together with European sanctions, at drying up the regime’s access to economic resources and breaking its coalition with the business class. A UN General Assembly vote condemning the repression of protestors (122 in favor, 13 against, and 41 abstentions, including China and Russia) showed the depth of the regime’s international isolation. An anti-Asad coalition, led by the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, and with the collaboration of lesser actors such as the Hariri faction in Lebanon and the new Libyan regime, began financing, training, arming, and infiltrating insurgents into the country. The Asad regime’s only chance of slipping out of this tightening stranglehold was its links to Hizballah in the west and, in the east, Iran and Iraq. It increasingly relied on Iran, whose Revolutionary Guard assisted it with electronic warfare and which urged Iraq to provide Syria with cheap oil and to stay out of the anti-Asad coalition. Meanwhile, Russia and China, antagonized by the West’s use of a UN humanitarian resolution to promote regime change at their expense in Libya, albeit under increasing Western pressure, protected Syria from a similar scenario. Whichever way Syria goes, it will be decisive for the current version of the “struggle for the Middle East.”

**Conclusion**

Syria’s main challenge when Bashar al-Asad came to power was whether economic reforms could stimulate the investment and growth needed to cope with dwindling oil revenues and burgeoning unemployment. Despite U.S. attempts to isolate Syria, the Bashar al-Asad regime actually accelerated its economic liberalization, and in the mid-2000s, Syria enjoyed an influx
of Arab investment that stabilized the economy. The country survived the effort of the Bush administration to make it a pariah state and reengaged with the West. Yet, preoccupied by his struggle with the old guard, economic reform, and external threats, al-Asad neglected his domestic power base and alienated the Baath party’s historic constituency. His mismanagement of peaceful protests for political reform turned them into a potential mass revolution from below that jeopardized his regime and threatened to end nearly half a century of Baathist rule in Syria.

**SUGGESTED READINGS**


