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Introduction

THE STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL CHANGE AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

"KINGS ARE THE SLAVES OF HISTORY," Leo Tolstoy famously declared. History's great protagonists, its drivers, are the ordinary people who too often get overlooked. Nowhere is this truer today than in the Middle East. Unlocking an understanding of their influence on events will open the door to greater comprehension, positive engagement, stability, and prosperity in the region and beyond.

War and Peace, Tolstoy's masterful chronicle of Russian life during the Napoleonic Wars, stands as a warning against distorting reality with neat explanations that disregard the countless multitude of causes and actors shaping events. "To study the laws of history," he argues, "we must change completely the object of observation, leave kings, ministers, and generals alone, and study the uniform, infinitesimal elements that govern the masses."[1] I am convinced that modern history should focus on the causes that generate political power, which, according to Tolstoy, derive from the work and actions of the people and their universal strivings.[2]

The fault lines and conflicts of the Napoleonic Wars that provide context for *War and Peace* are far less complex and sweeping than those prevailing in the Middle East and North Africa today. The application of Tolstoy's golden rule underscores the need to acknowledge the complexity and even chaos of developments in the region, and stands as a

reminder to eschew explanations that reduce humanity and people's struggles to the facile but false notions of ancient hatreds, Islam's incompatibility with democracy, tribalism or sectarianism, or to the actions of kings, emirs, and strongmen.

Mainstream discussion of the Middle East in the West has mainly focused on rulers and elite politics to the exclusion of society down below. But as the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the 2010–2012 Arab Spring revolts, and Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, taught us, focusing on elite politics gives us a skewed view of societal currents and blinds us to what is happening in the real world of Middle East politics. This book uses historical sociology as a methodological and conceptual framework, utilizing historical sources to make general statements and arguments of a theoretical nature about key events and watershed moments in the past one hundred years. It is written in the historical tradition with both a bottom-up and a top-down focus, which aims to show the struggle of everyday people against local and external actors for self-determination and justice.[3] My goal is to provide an inside-out story of how Middle Eastern peoples view themselves and the world. It is a book of interpretation that can be read by nonspecialists and used as a textbook to understand the modern history of the Middle East and the roots of instability in this region. While many theories of political science and international relations analyze today's affairs through abstract generalizations, historical sociology focuses on local context, deploying the scholarship of historians to answer questions relevant to the world we live in. If, on balance, social scientific theories have failed so far to explain "what is wrong" with the Middle East, it is imperative to ask ourselves what "went" wrong.

Tempting though oversimplifications may be, there is no "one cause fits all" to explain the current turmoil in the Middle East and the likelihood of collective action and political change. With so many forces and groups jockeying for power and advantage in the region today, it would be arbitrary and simplistic to look for a single cause. For example, do economic vulnerabilities like abject poverty and high unemployment among youth explain instability in the region? How about the role of autocrats and repression in fueling extremism and terrorism? Or does the "oil curse" and black gold in the Middle East leave the region prey to intense and repeated

intervention by the Great Powers? What about geostrategic rivalries and structural vulnerabilities like the prolonged Arab-Israeli conflict? Is it the fault of European imperialism, the global Cold War, or America's attempt to resurrect empire in the region? How about the huge social dislocations borne by Arab countries through the neoliberal reforms urged by Washington-based institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank? Do all these causes or a combination of them help explain socioeconomic underdevelopment and deepening political authoritarianism in the Middle East?

These questions do not lend themselves to easy, straightforward answers. The Middle East is in a transitional moment that reflects the enduring impact of the colonial legacy and the bloody path of nation-building as seen elsewhere in the Global South. The region is also witnessing a redefinition of social norms and undergoing upheaval as a result of intensified competition for space, resources, and survival rather than coexistence. Far from being frozen in time and space, the Middle East surprises us with its constant change and sudden shifts. The region's fluidity, variability, and volatility are difficult to quantify or compartmentalize. This book uses the terms "the Arab world" and "the Middle East" interchangeably. The broad generalist tone adopted in this book is not to suggest the region is a monolith but to show instead that the Middle East is a region whose problems must be addressed in a systemic way. In the following chapters, I will point out the differences and specific circumstances of regional states as well as unpack some of the terms mentioned in this introduction.

The more time I spend in the region, the more skeptical I am of those who offer tidy answers to the region's chronic instability. Anyone doubting the uselessness of simple solutions need only pay a visit to the vast graveyard housing disproved political science theories that met their end when applied to the Middle East; these abstract grand theories like modernization overlooked the complexity of the regional context and its historical-sociological specificity.[4] That is why I caution my students against being lured in by the temptation to apply neat, rigid arguments instead of the messier and conceptually elastic approaches necessary to grapple with complexity.

Notwithstanding the colonial origins of states and borders in the Middle East, one hundred years later these lines on the map have broad public support. Several generations of Arabs have been raised as Iraqis, Jordanians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Syrians, and Yemenis and have been educated in these postcolonial states. These new national identities have deep roots. Even in the collapsed states of Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and others, there is little public support for redrawing the borders. The plight of the Kurds falls outside of this framework, as does Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which also envision remaking of the Middle Eastern state system, including borders. In short, most people in the region accept the current nation-state framework. What they desire is more effective and accountable governance. The rallying cries of millions of protesters during the two waves of the Arab Spring revolts (2010–2012 and 2018–2019) revolved around citizenship and taking the state back from dictators-for-life, not sectarianism tribalism or secessionism.

Much ink has been spilled on the Middle East, but history is about more than examining past facts; it demands asking how historical events are still present and relevant today, and whom they affect. The famous German philosopher Georg Hegel once aptly pointed out that "in our language the term *History* unites the objective with the subjective side . . . it comprehends not less what has *happened*, than the *narration* of what has happened."[5] There is no substitute for firsthand knowledge of everyday people in the Middle East, their hopes, fears, and aspirations as well as their struggle for justice, freedom, and a dignified life. We historians have forgotten the subject of our study, as Tolstoy reminds us, which is the collective will and agency of the people, as well as the causes behind the manifestations of political power.

To insist on the complexity and specificity of the historical trajectory of the Middle East does not mean neglecting the existence of dominant "threads" of interrelated issues. These "threads" help us organize and synthesize our knowledge of the region and make sense of it. This book's analytical framework is built around the interaction of three key forces within the context of prolonged conflict. The first force is the constant and intense intervention by foreign powers in the region's internal affairs, initially by formal empires and later by informal ones.[6] The second is the

local trajectories of governance developed in different forms of traditional and modern authoritarianism. The third is the agency of everyday people in the Middle East. Making sense of the interactions of these forces requires that we consistently keep in mind how the first two forces, of foreign intervention and domestic authoritarianism, benefit from and actively propagate prolonged, violent conflict. This historical layer of prolonged conflict runs throughout the book and provides the backdrop against which all three key forces operate.

There is a puzzle at the heart of this book: How and under what conditions might collective action and political change take place in the contemporary Middle East? And why is there so much turmoil, instability, and anger in this region? This investigation will be structured by considering the three key forces foregrounded in this book—foreign intervention, political authoritarianism, and the agency of the people—and the theater of prolonged conflict that shapes each force and their interactions.

Foreign Intervention and Dependency

Since the early nineteenth century, Western powers have repeatedly intervened in the Middle East. Driven by imperial ambitions and the desire for military and economic expansion, they have presented the Arab-Islamic world as an exotic, irrational, and inferior cultural Other in need of a "civilizing mission." The pretext for intervention is usually national security, cited to cover more complex motives. These include, depending on the time, control of the region's strategic location, its natural resources, access to its markets, backing allies like Israel and the Gulf states, social engineering experiments like America's invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, and preventing rival global powers from gaining a foothold.

This pattern of repeated and intense foreign intervention in the region's internal affairs continues today. The end of imperial politics has been predicted many times, but in spite of the tumultuous events that have rocked the region over the past century, it has not yet happened. As a set of practices and an ideology, imperial domination and control has proven remarkably durable, nimble, and dynamic. The colonial experience derails and disrupts a country's normal social, economic, and political progression, leaving deep

and lasting scars.[7] The Middle East has not recovered from the social, economic, and political devastation caused by European imperialism.

Besides this toxic legacy, colonialism did not really end with the formal independence of Middle Eastern countries following World War II. Western intervention has persisted, prolonging colonialism under different names and disguises. From the 1950s until the late 1980s, the United States and the Soviet Union also fought proxy wars in the newly decolonized Global South, including in the Middle East. Casualties among American and Soviet citizens were relatively low—but in the proxy societies they were staggering.

In my recent book, *What Really Went Wrong*, I argue that the impact and effects of the global Cold War on the newly independent Middle Eastern states and societies was transformational. The region was reimagined as a Cold War chessboard, leaving a legacy marked by weak political institutions, fragile sovereignty, lopsided economic growth, and political systems prone to authoritarianism. Washington's decision to roll back Soviet communism and its desire to build a new informal empire frustrated early efforts by the first generation of postcolonial leaders in newly independent nations. The Cold War also polarized the Middle East into two rival camps—pro-Western and nonaligned—forcing decolonized leaders to shift focus and priority away from development and institution-building to geostrategic competition and rivalry.[8]

The worst legacy of the Cold War was to deprive people of the Middle East of their right to self-determination. From colonial times to today, Western (and Russian) covert and overt military interventions repeatedly undermined internal societal forces seeking to bring about alternative forms of progressive governance but strengthened compliant dictators. The lingering impact and effects of colonial and neocolonial processes is discernible not only in the ways actors within the Middle East think about their past but also in the persistence of colonial narratives and in the old European (and later American) attitudes toward the region. Colonialism did not just retire into the sunset. It reproduced itself through indirect means of control, making sure to preserve the vital economic and geopolitical interests of the imperial powers, particularly oil, military bases, and arms deals.

Although the United States can no longer unilaterally impose its will and dominate the Middle East, it has been trying to compensate for its relative decline and retrenchment from the region by setting up an empire by proxy. US decision makers seek to assemble a new regional grouping, which will include Israel and pro-Western Arab states, whose raison d'être is containment of Iran and ultimately regime change in Tehran. America's empire by proxy aims to lead from behind and provide its local partners with weapons, intelligence, leadership, and logistical resources, whereby they defend themselves and do the heavy lifting.

It is precisely the region's many riches and strategic assets that attract so much unwanted interference. In the past 100 years, trillions of petrodollars have been recycled and invested in the West, deepening the material ties—or, more precisely, the dependencies—that bind the region to the global capital and financial markets.

That is why the role of the Great Powers is so central to understanding how we reached this point of organic crisis in the Middle East. Of all explanations, the international level of analysis helps us make sense of why the region is marked by dependency, political authoritarianism, weak democratic forces, geostrategic rivalries, and rampant militarism and extremism. The story of the Middle East in the last 100 years cannot be fully told without accounting for the preponderant role of external actors (be it the colonial European powers or neocolonialist America), which made pacts with local autocrats and strongmen. Both the borders of some Middle Eastern states and their institutions were set up by white men in smoke-filled tea rooms in Western capitals, as was the establishment of Israel in the heart of the Arab world. Those outside forces never eased their grip on what they set up with the deliberate goal of maintaining control, disregarding the interests and aspirations of everyday people in the region.

While European colonialism exercised direct territorial control, after World War II the right to self-determination and sovereignty could not be so openly violated. Nevertheless, the United States used informal means to tame assertive Middle Eastern leaders like Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh and Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and to financially reward local collaborators and friends like Shah Mohammad

Reza Pahlavi of Iran and the Saudi royal family. The means were different, but the effects were the same. What emerged from this was a policy of backing authoritarian strongmen in the name of stability, which has become a cardinal rule of how Western governments deal with the Middle East today.

Unlike other regions, Middle Eastern states and peoples, with few exceptions, have not been left alone to determine their own affairs. Unceasing foreign meddling by Western powers has exacerbated the region's problems and undermined territorial sovereignty and independence. Local leaders who resist Western hegemony do so at their peril. Mossadegh lost power and his freedom in August 1953 after he nationalized oil and sought to use natural resources to modernize the country. In the second half of the 1950s, Nasser narrowly escaped a similar fate to Mossadegh's because he pursued a nonaligned foreign policy and mobilized economic assets to lift millions of Egyptians out of severe poverty. Half a century later, Iraqi president Saddam Hussein met a fatal end after he dared to challenge America's hegemony in the Gulf.

Despite their stark differences, what Mossadegh and Hussein shared in common was a defiance of Western (American) imperial ambitions and a desire to act independently. The United States, together with Britain, deposed both Mossadegh, a democrat, and Saddam Hussein, an autocrat, under the pretext of combatting Soviet communism (replaced later on with Islamist extremism) and defending stability. The result is that Iran's and Iraq's political and developmental trajectory was altered, empowering radical and revolutionary ideologies like Shia and Sunni puritanical Islamism.

One hundred years after the end of European imperialism, Arab states are as dependent on and subservient to foreign patrons as ever. Unlike the first generation of postindependence Middle Eastern leaders like Mossadegh, Nasser, and Saudi king Faisal, who defended the dignity of their people and nations, today's Arab rulers fear their people and depend on external support for political survival. Most lack popular legitimacy and authority, relying instead on patronage, cronyism, and coercion. More than a hundred years after its formation, the modern Middle East is still the most penetrated region in the world.[9]

With the exception of Turkey and Iran, Arab states in the Middle East have not attained either economic sovereignty or even basic food security. The neoliberal economic reforms known as the Washington consensus imposed by the IMF and the World Bank on many Middle Eastern countries in the mid-1980s and 1990s led to huge inequities and disparities.[10] And while these policies were applied across the Global South, the damage took a particularly heavy toll on the middle class and the poor in the Middle East. The ruling elite plundered both private and public sectors, defeating even the misguided intentions of reforms imposed by the international financial institutions and exacerbating the already-yawning wealth gap. The United Nations estimates that the Arab region's top thirty-one billionaires, all men, own almost as much wealth as the bottom half of the adult population.[11] Such massive inequality was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the food crisis caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and Israel's war in Gaza and Lebanon in 2023–2024, which to date has killed and injured more than 150,000 Palestinians and thousands of Lebanese.

One of the great tragedies of the Middle East is the contrast between its near-total dependence on others and its inherent, indigenous riches—and here I do not only mean oil, crops, or other commodities but also the intelligence and ingenuity of its peoples. The region used to export food but can no longer feed its people, relying for its bread on wheat from Ukraine, Russia, the United States, and beyond. In fact, for all of its rich, fertile land, waterways, and millennia of farming and irrigation, the Middle East is now one of the most food-insecure regions in the world.[12] This could be explained by official neglect and mismanagement of the agriculture sector as well as water scarcity.

Yet, foreign intervention and colonialism are not the whole story about the dynamics that affect the everyday life of people in the Middle East.

Governance and the Global Setting

The story of the Middle East over the past 100 years is one of creeping and deepening political authoritarianism and gross economic mismanagement. While the Great Powers constantly intervene in the region's inter-

nal affairs either directly or indirectly, autocratic leaders who depend on external patrons for survival correspondingly exploit the specter of "foreign intervention" to whip up nationalist sentiment and hype up security fears. Turning the histories of foreign intervention like the Sykes-Picot Agreement into a discursive marker, not just a historical agreement, regional strongmen justified repression against dissidents and progressives by labeling them "foreign agents." An ironic twist considering who the real foreign agents are.

For example, the shah of Iran, who was installed in power by the United States, clamped down against Marxists and leftists, accusing them of being agents for the Soviet Union. Using similar tactics, the clerics in Tehran, the shah's successors, repress human rights activists and progressive critics under the pretext of foiling Western plots against the Islamic Republic. Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Assad clan in Syria (father and son) demonized and terrorized dissidents as traitors to the homeland. Even President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey has reverted to this scapegoating tactic to silence opposition at home and drum up religious and ultranationalist sentiment.

In "hot conflicts" and civil strife countries, such as Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, local elites seek foreign intervention to gain strategic advantage over their domestic adversaries. External intervention in the region's internal affairs is perpetuated by self-serving rulers whose goal is to consolidate their authoritarian rule.

Since 1954, Lebanon's sectarian-dominated elite have jostled with each other to induce the United States, the Soviet Union, Iran, Israel, Syria, and other external actors to take their side. The post–Saddam Hussein politicians climbed to power in Iraq on the shoulders of US troops. As the Arab Spring uprising reached Syria in 2011, President Bashar al-Assad implored Iran and Russia to come to his rescue and put down a popular revolt against his brutal rule. On December 8, 2024, his brutal regime collapsed like ripened fruit due to the inability or unwillingness of Russia and Iran to continue propping him up. The swift downfall of Assad clearly shows that external intervention sustains domestic authoritarians and prolongs their reign.

This point cannot be overemphasized. While rulers benefit from their client status, citizens chafe. In a measure of the disintegration of public

trust at home, these same citizens, due to their desperation, look abroad for salvation. It is truly a sad irony that ordinary people appeal to external powers to help them get rid of their repressive tormentors. Raised on a steady diet of anti-imperial sentiments and pro-Arab pride, this represents a remarkable departure from all that they cherish in a desperate bid to escape the injustice, repression, and poverty that works so well for those who are in power entirely at the expense of those who are not.

In 2011, many Libyans welcomed NATO's military intervention against Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi and subsequent regime change. Likewise, the Syrian opposition naively hoped that the Western governments might remove Assad from power, repeatedly urging the United States and Europe to do so. The Kurds of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey collaborate with foreign powers against the central authority in Baghdad, Damascus, and Ankara with no reciprocal consideration for the risk and sacrifice incurred. Following the explosion at Beirut's port in August 2020, which devastated much of the country's capital, more than 50,000 Lebanese signed a petition to place the country under the control of France, their former colonial master, for the next ten years. Forsaken by their Arab brethren and the world at large, the Palestinians turned to Iran and its local proxies for arms and finance in order to resist Israeli colonial rule.

I had never imagined that large constituencies of public opinion might condone and even lobby former colonial powers to return to the Middle East as liberators. That they do so, despite all the wrongs Western powers have done to the Middle East, is the strongest possible evidence of how badly Arab rulers have failed everyday people, violating the dignity of citizens with impunity and pauperizing the society as a whole.

Revisiting the choices and actions made by the local elites, who are backed by their superpower patrons, clearly shows these choices—not genetics, Arab exceptionalism, or a cultural defect—hold an answer to why the Middle East is a politically imploding economic wasteland. It is time to acknowledge the indigenous elites' share of the responsibility for the dismal state of the region.

Unlike the first generation of postindependence leaders who exercised agency in order to attain economic and political sovereignty, their successors have prioritized political survival and deepened their countries' dependence on foreign powers. Iran is a case in point. While Mossadegh

nationalized Iran's oil in 1951 and hoped to use the resources to modernize the country, his successor, the shah, who was installed in power by the Americans in 1953, denationalized oil and allowed Western companies to control the petroleum industry. The shah also tied his political fate to the United States in return for military and development aid. Even if Western support and oil revenues brought some money to Iran, under the shah the country remained a commodity-dependent economy without any real productive sectors. His political legitimacy was negatively affected, and this set the stage for the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

Similarly, the early generation of postindependence Arab leaders must now be turning in their graves. As the first leader of Egypt to rise from the masses and become the president of the republic, throughout his rule Nasser, like Mossadegh, aimed to rid his country of the legacy of imperial control and gain full national sovereignty. In doing so, Nasser fought constant battles with the Great Powers, including Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union. In December 1964, Nasser lashed back at American criticism and delays on economic aid to Egypt and publicly reprimanded the US ambassador, Lucius D. Battle. He told him to "drink from the sea."[13] "And if the Mediterranean Sea is not big enough," Nasser went on, "we will give him the Red Sea to drink it, too." Nasser's rebuke was the equivalent of telling the ambassador to "jump in the lake."[14] Implying that President Lyndon B. Johnson was trying to attach strings to its the United States' huge economic aid program, Nasser said Egyptians were ready to tighten their belts in order to preserve their dignity and independence. "The Americans want to give us aid and dominate our policy. I say we are sorry. We are ready to cut our rations and minimize the daily consumption so that we keep our independence," Nasser stated.[15]

King Faisal of Saudi Arabia was a very different man from Nasser in terms of background and worldview and yet was equally determined to build a strong and independent country. He reportedly let US secretary of state Henry Kissinger have it after Kissinger implicitly threatened to occupy the Saudi oil fields if the Kingdom did not lift the oil embargo in 1973. "You are the ones who can't live without oil. You know, we come from the desert, and our ancestors lived on dates and milk and we can easily go back and live like that again," said King Faisal to his US ally.[16]

Despite the many flaws of Mossadegh, Nasser, and Faisal, they were proud, defiant leaders. They never lost sight of the importance of achieving independence and dignity for their peoples. The first generation of postindependence leaders understood the organic links between gaining real independence and overcoming dependency and economic underdevelopment. Trying to do so, Mossadegh fell on his sword in a CIA-orchestrated coup in 1953. Similarly, Nasser faced political death by a thousand cuts in the June 1967 war with Israel, and Faisal fell to an assassin's bullets in 1975.

In a matter of years, those ancestors who lived on dates and milk were succeeded by a new generation of leaders that had to import staple foods and mortgaged their countries' independence in return for backing by the United States in order to retain power. Egypt and Saudi Arabia are cases in point. President Anwar al-Sadat and especially his successor, Hosni Mubarak, turned Egypt into a client state for the United States in return for military aid and political support for their regimes. His successor, General Abdel al-Fatah al-Sisi, has not fared better. Former US president Donald Trump jokingly referred to al-Sisi as "my favorite dictator."[17]

Similarly, although Saudi Arabia is now one of the wealthiest states in the world, it is increasingly dependent on the United States for protection against foreign threats. Saudi's dependence on its superpower patron breeds contempt and exploitation by US leaders. President Barack Obama called the Saudis "freeloaders." Obama forgot that the Saudis have pumped hundreds of billions of dollars into US coffers by purchasing arms, luxury goods, and treasury bonds. Trump went further than his predecessor by publicly humiliating his loyal Saudi ally. He boasted to supporters that Saudi Arabia and its king would not last "two weeks" in power without American military protection.[18] During his presidential campaign in 2019, Trump's successor, Joe Biden, warned Saudi Arabia that he would treat it like "the pariah that they are."[19]

The current tensions in US-Saudi relations is partly due to the assertiveness of the new Saudi leader, Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman (known as MBS), who has de facto ruled the country since 2015. MBS has portrayed himself as a strong, independent leader in an effort to build up

his popularity at home and prepare the ground for his smooth succession to the Saudi throne. His use of Saudi Arabia's economic power to regulate global oil prices angered the Biden administration. In Spring 2023, MBS upset US officials further by agreeing to normalize relations with Iran in a diplomatic deal brokered by China. However, MBS's actions are not aimed at building a real independent path for Saudi Arabia. Instead, according to US officials, MBS demands a new defense pact with the United States that secures a formal American commitment to defend Saudi Arabia with military force as well as advanced arms. In other words, the assertiveness by MBS and other Arab rulers does not challenge the foundation of Saudi and Arab dependency on the United States for protection and political survival. This symbiotic relationship between local leaders, their autocratic rule, and their foreign patrons is a key factor in sustaining political authoritarianism in the Middle East.

Bad governance and flawed leadership combined with structural factors help explain the wretched social and political conditions of Middle Eastern societies. The ruling elites who replaced the first generation of postindependence leaders did not fulfill their promises to deliver prosperity, justice, and freedom—and, most importantly, they failed to respect the dignity of everyday people. Instead of safeguarding national sovereignty, they relied heavily on external stakeholders to ensure political survival. They prioritized regime security at the expense of defending the national interest. Instead of promoting transparency, accountability, social mobility, and integration, Middle Eastern rulers set up one-party rule and eliminated all organized opposition. They deinstitutionalized the political and sectarianized it. Instead of strengthening the institutional ties that bind citizens to each other and the nation-state, these autocrats built expansive security apparatuses to consolidate their rule.

Although there are many wealthy Arabs, the Arab people as a collective are pauperized. The statistics on poverty, unemployment, the income gap, food insecurity, corruption, and stagnation in the system are shocking when compared to the natural wealth that many of these countries possess. For example, the Arab region is the only developing area in the world where income poverty rose in the last decade: in 2020, about one-third of the population, or 115 million people, were estimated to be

poor, up from 66 million people in 2010. It also suffers from rampant inequality, with the wealthiest 10 percent of Arab adults holding more than 75 percent of total regional wealth, according to a recent study by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).[20] Iranians do not fare better than their Arab counterparts. The regional economy is broken.

Cronyism has also led to state-sanctioned injustice, violence, and exclusion, thereby creating a pattern of alienation affecting the population.[21] In the Arab world, states sanction identity. Political parties are often formed on identity lines, with quotas for representation built into the system. This is ultimately destabilizing, though, because the state-carved identity lines are largely artificial and fail to reflect the natural society upon which state power actually rests. Even the one-party rule initially established by postindependence strongmen morphed into a cult of personality. The state steadily became synonymous with the predilections of the sole leader and a small, corrupt, and sycophantic inner circle.

The Agency of Everyday People

Historically, the intelligentsia stood as a vanguard for change and an expression of popular sentiment, but it has long forfeited that role. Since the late 1960s, pessimism and fatalism have taken hold of the Arab spirit. The mood of public intellectuals grew increasingly gloomy as they lost confidence in the future. The dominant narrative among Arab intelligentsia is self-defeating and despairing, surrendering its role as a vehicle of change. In the face of such corruption and disempowerment, many leading intellectuals chose or were forced to cross borders and settle in the very colonial countries whose past actions they rightly denounced.

With Arab intellectuals seized by pessimism, it is no wonder then that they played no discernible role in the two waves of Arab Spring uprisings, which were leaderless.[22] In contrast, everyday people stood up and filled the vacuum left by the retrenchment of intellectuals. If there is one lesson that we ought to draw from the struggles of everyday people of the region, it is their refusal to accept dictatorship, cronyism, and corruption as inevitable.[23] The history of the Middle East is as much marked by

authoritarianism and state violence and exclusion as it is by popular insurrection against tyranny, a lesson often lost on Western commentators.

The first step in moving beyond a fatalism that only serves despotic elites is to abandon the tendency to see the people in the region as victims and passive spectators in a Shakespearean tragedy. Even after millions of courageous citizens have taken to the streets since 2010 to topple autocrats in the region, everyday people are still not taken seriously in the Western media commentary and coverage of the Middle East.[24]

It is no wonder that both writers and policymakers were caught napping when the Arab Spring uprisings burst out in 2010 and lasted till 2012. The media and Western analysts belatedly discovered that, after all, there is an Arab public opinion, and that political authoritarianism is not so durable. The Arab state system was not frozen in time and space, and tyranny was not destiny. Peacefully and inclusively, the millions of people who filled the freedom squares in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, and elsewhere called for freedom, justice, and dignity, earning the respect of the world. The Arab Spring uprisings showed us in real time that everyday people yearn for citizenship, political participation, and empowerment, and oppose autocrats, false prophets, and extremist ideologies.

The first wave of the Arab Spring was a rude awakening for many Westerners who saw the Middle East as a hotbed of terrorists who threaten their own way of life. But the people in the street were neither carrying Al-Qaeda's black flags nor burning US or Israeli flags. The uplifting stories of millions of peaceful protesters, young and old, men and women, poor and rich, were a reminder of the universal struggle of humanity for a better life. They were not divided by sect but united in purpose. No longer caricatures of "Arabs," these people revealed the shared longing for democracy, justice, and peace that is common to all.[25]

This may have moved some individuals in the West, but their governments were unresponsive. Bloody dictators like Assad and the House of Khalifa in Bahrain acted in collusion with regional and global powers, and exploited geostrategic rivalries, to shatter the dreams of millions of everyday people for a dignified life. The crushing of the first wave of the Arab Spring uprisings by Arab counterrevolutionary forces and their foreign patrons triggered civil strife and wars that still rage in Libya,

Yemen, and beyond, and fueled the resurgence of sectarian groups and militias like the Islamic State. This is another example of Arab despots colluding with foreign powers to maintain the status quo and to prevent any real change.

The voices of everyday people were muzzled and silenced for a while, prompting those in the West who had celebrated the Arab Spring to quickly pen its obituary. They were wrong to write off people's agency and consign the Middle East to a perpetual cycle of supposed Oriental despotism. Even for a region that has dominated world headlines for decades, today's Middle East is remarkable for its surprises.

To prove that the announcement of their deaths was premature, Arab uprisings roared back to life in a second wave in 2018–2019. Reverberating widely, it undulated in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan, playing out on Arab streets, demonstrating that local agency is alive and that the struggle for representation continues. Millions of women, youth, and men today strongly challenge the status quo, reawakening consciousness among the larger citizenry.

Rather than starting from scratch, the new protesters drew valuable lessons from their predecessors in 2010–2012, especially the need to stay on the streets till the authorities respond to their demands and to face repression and even death without resorting to violence. The second wave, coming six years after the first wave, has given us a glimpse of the emergence of a new generation of freedom fighters whose aspirations revolve around social justice, political representation, and jobs. In Iraq and Lebanon, in particular, millions of protesters joined ranks from across the confessional and political spectrum to demand accountability, citizenship, and an end to the systemic corruption of the ruling elite.

Although the aspirations of the protesters have been crushed, activists and civil society groups acknowledge that the struggle to transform their societies will be long and fraught with setbacks. The struggle will continue, these freedom fighters insist. Indeed, we ought to listen to the hopes and fears of the people and learn from their struggles. As the following pages will show, this struggle for freedom, dignity, and sovereignty did not begin with the Arab Spring in 2010; it has been carried out since the onset of European imperialism in the nineteenth century.[26] For example, Hamas's

surprise attack on Israel in 2023 has rocked the regional status quo and reminded the world of the unfulfilled quest by the Palestinians in the past 100 years for self-determination and freedom. This was also a reminder of how unresolved questions from the past still trigger wars and cause a humanitarian catastrophe.

With the exception of the rich, all sectors of society who represent a majority of the population are badly hurt, seeing their living conditions deteriorate further due to the turmoil and conflict that wrecked the region over the last two decades. A doctor in Syria who once commanded respect, lived comfortably, and contributed to society now struggles on a dangerous migratory journey to an uncertain and likely vulnerable future threatened by poverty, disease, and even hate crimes. Millions have lost their jobs and meagre subsistence incomes. Spiraling inflation coupled with a steep decline in the value of local currency has forced tragic choices onto millions: food or medicine? Stay and suffer war and a collapsed economy or leave your homeland and suffer discrimination and dislocation? Cling with hope to the vanishing past or set out for an extremely perilous future?

This was all before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the economic meltdown in several Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Tunisia.[27] For all the xenophobia surrounding the exodus of refugees from the region pouring into Europe, the vast majority stay there, hosted by neighboring countries and peoples in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, who display a spirit of Arab-Islamic generosity, which, silently but surely, saves lives there. A pandemic is lethal anywhere; a pandemic in a densely crowded refugee camp where water and soap are in scarce supply amounts to a mass death sentence for the vulnerable.

Pauperized and pressed between autocrats and extremists, for now, everyday people are preoccupied with survival. We have not heard their last roar, however. History has shown that the best way to defuse an opposition movement is not through force but by meeting its legitimate demands. Injustice is unsustainable over the long run because the human spirit—in the Arab world as everywhere—will ultimately risk safety to end it.

The region's rulers face a stark choice. Will they continue to rule by domination, divide-and-conquer tactics, and dependence on their foreign masters, or will they address the legitimate grievances of their people and their calls for justice, dignity, and freedom?

The first choice, almost too scary to contemplate, means more of the same failed policies, failed development, and even failed states, not to speak of the senseless loss of life and potential of the affected population. It would mean prolonged political instability, worsening terrorism, protracted civil wars, waves of refugees, and incalculable human suffering. This doomsday scenario will not only plague the Middle East but will also hurt Western and Asian states, which, in the global village, cannot isolate themselves.

The second option promises to arrest economic and cultural decline and end the political violence and civil wars that have ravaged the region. Building trust between governments and peoples would strengthen the resilience of both state and society, making them less dependent on external actors and less prey to foreign meddling and extremism. It could signal the beginning of the end of the hundred years' war for control of the Middle East.

Middle Eastern rulers resist instituting change at their own peril, as Bashar al-Assad belatedly discovered. It is not a question of whether protesters will achieve their aims but rather when. Yes, the process of political change will be fraught and difficult, but to avoid this will extract an astronomical cost in terms of lives, livelihoods, and stability.

In this effort, it will be helpful to remember the proud struggles of the region's peoples and the change that they have already achieved. As remarkable as the first Arab Spring was, taking pundits and experts completely by surprise, the second wave was even more noteworthy for arriving while the rest of the world had given up on the capacity of the region's people.

To envision a new future for the Middle East, one free of despotic rulers, settler colonialism, outside interference, and repressive governance, requires breaking with unimaginative and limited attachment to the paradigm of the status quo. The lockdown imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, together with festering civil strife and wars, may have necessarily muffled the cries for justice, but nothing can silence them.[28]

The Struggle for Representative Government in the Middle East

Reviewing a century of history in the Middle East is not simply a look back at the past hundred years; it is a journey into a deeper understanding of the region's dream for an inclusive, open, free, and peaceful society. And how and why this dream has been thwarted and the region's material, political, and spiritual capital has been squandered. An inside-out historical perspective on the Middle East helps us make sense of the contemporary moment there. Specifically, the yearning for self-determination is still out of reach for the vast majority of the population, and promises by Western leaders to support development and democracy ring hollow in the ears of many Middle Easterners.

Detangling the respective roles of internal, regional, and global actors in creating the current anti-democratic climate will open the way for explaining today's state of affairs and planning a new tomorrow. The future of the Middle East will ultimately be determined by the massive and growing Arab/Muslim youth population, not by the dictators who rule over them. This latter group gets a disproportionate amount of media coverage, thus distorting the reality of the region and the many problems that plague it.

In the pages that follow, readers will discover how the politics of the past can give way to the politics of the future, especially through empowering change from the bottom up. This book examines the modern history of the Middle East by using the lenses of foreign intervention, political authoritarianism, and the agency of everyday people. The first two forces feed upon each other, triggering prolonged conflicts that act as the main constraints on social progress and change and systemically denying people self-determination. With an understanding that people drive history and shape the future, there is room for outside forces to support this process, motivated not by thirst for petro-dollars, influence, or markets for armaments, but by an awareness that respecting the dignity and agency of Middle Eastern people will benefit the entire world.

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