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The Contemporary Middle East: The Resilience of Traditional Society

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In the late 1950's Daniel Lerner published *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1958), which became a classic of sorts in Middle Eastern studies. But traditional society has not passed entirely from the scene. As the "Arab Spring" upheavals have shown, critically important characteristics of traditional society, such as the intimate association of religion and politics, and the salience of sectarianism and tribalism, remain important facets of Middle Eastern societies, albeit in different neo-traditional forms.

The Problematique *of Definition*

Traditions themselves are often invented and reinvented.[1] Thus present-day neo-traditionalism is not simply an unaltered replica of the past, but more often than not, it is itself a product of modernity and an effort to contend with the challenges of the modern world by the mobilization of traditional values, however reinterpreted they may be.

The neo-traditionalists differ from the modernists in that the latter are more generally future oriented than the former, who tend to be more past-oriented in their search for answers for the problems and challenges of the present. Neo-traditionalists are not averse to all that modernity has to offer and modernists do not reject everything about tradition. But the two are usually situated on very different places on the modernity-tradition continuum. It is not a clear-cut black and white dichotomy, rather a matter of degree. Nonetheless, the degree of difference is significant.

[1] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

European and Middle Eastern Historical Experience

The European experience of state formation and modernization and the idea of secularization, as expounded upon in the works of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, the "trinity" of social theorists — in which the decline of religious belief was "scientifically forecasted" — was not reenacted in the Middle East. The partial adoption of secularizing policies by nineteenth and twentieth-century Middle East states failed to produce secular societies. Though organized religion did decline, new religious movements with mass followings emerged.[2]

Benedict Anderson has observed that in Western Europe, the eighteenth century marked "not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought," which were superseded by rationalist secularism.[3] In the Middle East, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were an era of profound ideological ferment, as Western ideas of secularism and nationalism entered into the local intellectual discourse. However, in this region the dawn of nationalism was not accompanied by the dusk of religious modes of thought; rather, the two continued to interact and to collide with each other, experiencing different periods of relative success in the marketplace of ideas.

The Resilience of Tradition: Historical Background

There are four main explanations for the resilience of tradition in the Middle East:

1) The non-separation of religion and politics;
2) The inherent tension between individual rights and group rights;
3) The territorialization of collective identity; and
4) A reform process which was initiated from the top down, by governments and by narrowly-based intellectual elites, rather than from the bottom up.

- **The non-separation of religion and politics**

The ideal Western type of "government of the people, by the people, for the people", as formulated by Abraham Lincoln in his famous Gettysburg Address some 150 years ago, distinguished clearly between the sovereignty of man and the sovereignty of God. This separation was never fully endorsed in the Muslim Middle East (with the exception of the first few decades of Republican Turkey). The Islamic reformers of the late nineteenth century went to great lengths to promote a synthesis between Islam and modern science and Western-style progress, arguing that there was no real contradiction between them.

[2] Mansoor Moaddel, *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism: Episode and Discourse* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 339-340.

[3] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 11.

This allowed their disciples to go in two diametrically opposed directions. If there was indeed no contradiction between Islam and modernity, one could argue that Islam was not in need of any far-reaching reform if correctly interpreted, or alternatively, that Muslims could go ahead and adopt Western ways lock, stock, and barrel since there was no inherent contradiction between Islam and secularizing Western values.

In the 1920s, Egypt's intellectual scene experienced an "attack upon tradition"[4] that was met in the 1930s by an energetic Islamist reaction. Westernizers and Islamists have been in fierce competition ever since, not only in Egypt. Over the years secular regimes made concessions to the Islamists in order to maintain political equilibrium, allowing religion back into the constitutions, the courts, and the school systems.

- **The tension between individual rights and group rights**

As Malcolm Yapp observed, Middle Eastern society was traditionally composed of

> various groups whose relationship to each other was like that of pieces in a mosaic. Governments recognized the existence of these groups and dealt with them in different ways. There was no assumption that society was composed of numbers of individuals who should be treated in a uniform fashion; rather different groups had different rights and interests required to be governed in different ways.

Society was structured by groups based on birth: family, extended family, tribe and, most importantly, religious sect. [5]

The explosion of the "Arab Spring" had far more to do with economic grievances and hopelessness than with the demand for civil rights. Neither the popularly elected Muslim Brotherhood regime of former President Muhammad Morsi, nor the current regime of Field Marshal ʿAbd al-Fattah al-Sisi, who came to power on the wings of a widely supported *coup d'état*, had the civil rights of individuals as a high priority on their respective agendas.

If anything, the very popular Sisi regime was more brutally repressive of opponents of all stripes, religious and secular, than his Islamist predecessor. The struggle between the two was never mainly about civil rights for individuals but about how best to achieve power and prosperity for Egypt and about its collective identity: namely, its place on the spectrum between religion and secularism, between tradition and modernity.

[4] P.J. Vatikiotis, *The Modern History of Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), pp. 292-312.
[5] Malcolm Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Middle East, 1792-1923* (London: Longman, 1987), p. 36.

In Iraq, following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the U.S. expectation was that the people of Iraq, as individuals, would establish a Western style pluralist, democratic, party system. But instead, the respective Sunni and Shiʿi Muslim Arab groups, went to war with each other, and now, over ten years later, that conflict is still claiming about a thousand lives every month. In Syria, an outburst of opposition in March 2011, which apparently begun because of individual grievances of peasants of the periphery, quickly developed into a horrific sectarian civil war of the ruling ʿAlawis against much of the Sunni majority.

Libya and Yemen are both extreme examples of tribal-based conflict that are threatening, along with other regional, factional or sectarian cleavages, to tear these countries apart.

- **The territorialization of collective identity**

One of the various European ideas that were absorbed into Middle Eastern societies in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries was the linkage between community and territorial contiguity and specificity. In the traditional Ottoman order communities lived side by side throughout the Empire with almost no regard for territorial boundaries. With the momentum of nationalism, the idea that communities or nations inhabited, or should inhabit, spaces of their own gained widespread currency. The Ottoman reforms of the mid-nineteenth century, the *Tanzimat*, introduced the principle of equality before the law. This came to replace the system whereby the various religious communities, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, lived in accordance with their own legal systems. With the application of the new principle of equality, state law was applied for the first time ever to all subjects of the Empire throughout the territory under its sovereign control.

This gave rise to new forms of collective identity, such as Ottomanism, in order to unite all Ottoman subjects as one nation. Ottomanism, however, never met with much success and was soon succeeded by Turkish nationalism and other ethnic nationalisms that aspired to link community with language and specific territory. Thus the Balkan nations, Greeks, Serbs, Bulgars and others instead of becoming equal under the law as Ottoman subjects, preferred equality in countries of their own and sought, and eventually obtained, independence. Turkish-speaking Muslims were left with the heartland of the Empire, Anatolia, as their prospective homeland. They were thus soon to come into conflict with the large Armenian community that lived throughout Anatolia, especially in its eastern region, and who similarly sought self-determination. The resulting conflicts of interest eventually culminated in the Armenian genocide during World War I.

This same problem of territorialized identity led to the Turkish-Greek population exchange of 1923 and to many other ethnic conflicts throughout the former Ottoman lands, from the Greek-Turkish conflict in Cyprus, to the wars of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans of the 1990s, and the present-day sectarian struggles in Syria and Iraq, which like earlier such conflicts include numerous instances of communal warfare and even ethnic cleansing. When central governments in modern Arab states were able to dominate their societies and instill the "fear of government" (*haybat al-hukm*) in their peoples, they could maintain internal order of these communally divergent states. But that is no longer true in countries like Iraq, Syria, Libya or Yemen that possess neither powerful central governments nor consensual social contracts. For some of these countries, even their continued existence, within existing internationally recognized boundaries, is increasingly a question mark.

- **Reform from the top down rather than from the bottom up**

Throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries Western style modernizing and secularizing reforms were introduced in the various countries of the Middle East: by Muhammad Ali and his dynasty in Egypt and the Tanzimat in the rest of the Ottoman Empire, in the nineteenth century, and the reforms of Kemal Ataturk in Turkey of the 1920s, and Gamal Abdel Nasser and the other officer regimes in the Arab states of the mid-twentieth century. Secularizing reforms, however, were introduced top down and not bottom up. They were never introduced in the wake of popular agitation. Quite the contrary, they were always imposed from above, often on an unwilling and uncooperative populace. Secularization never penetrated very far or very deep in Middle Eastern societies. Asef Bayat described Egypt as a "secularegious" state,[6] a fitting epithet for other Arab countries too.

These societies, for the most part, are going through a prolonged phase of socio-economic crisis and distress, which are often coupled with a sense of profound hopelessness. In such circumstances it is hardly surprising that many of the people tend to seek the comforting and familiar embrace of neo-traditionalist political trends and organizations, whether in the form of political Islam, sectarian associations or tribal loyalties. Thus the struggles of the Arab Spring, for the most part, are more about these forms of neo-traditionalist politics than simply a fight for democracy and civil rights per se.

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[6] Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic; Social Movements and the Post-Islamic Turn* (Stanford University Press, 2007), pp.48, 173.

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