



Political Culture and the Puzzle of Persistent Authoritarianism in the Middle East

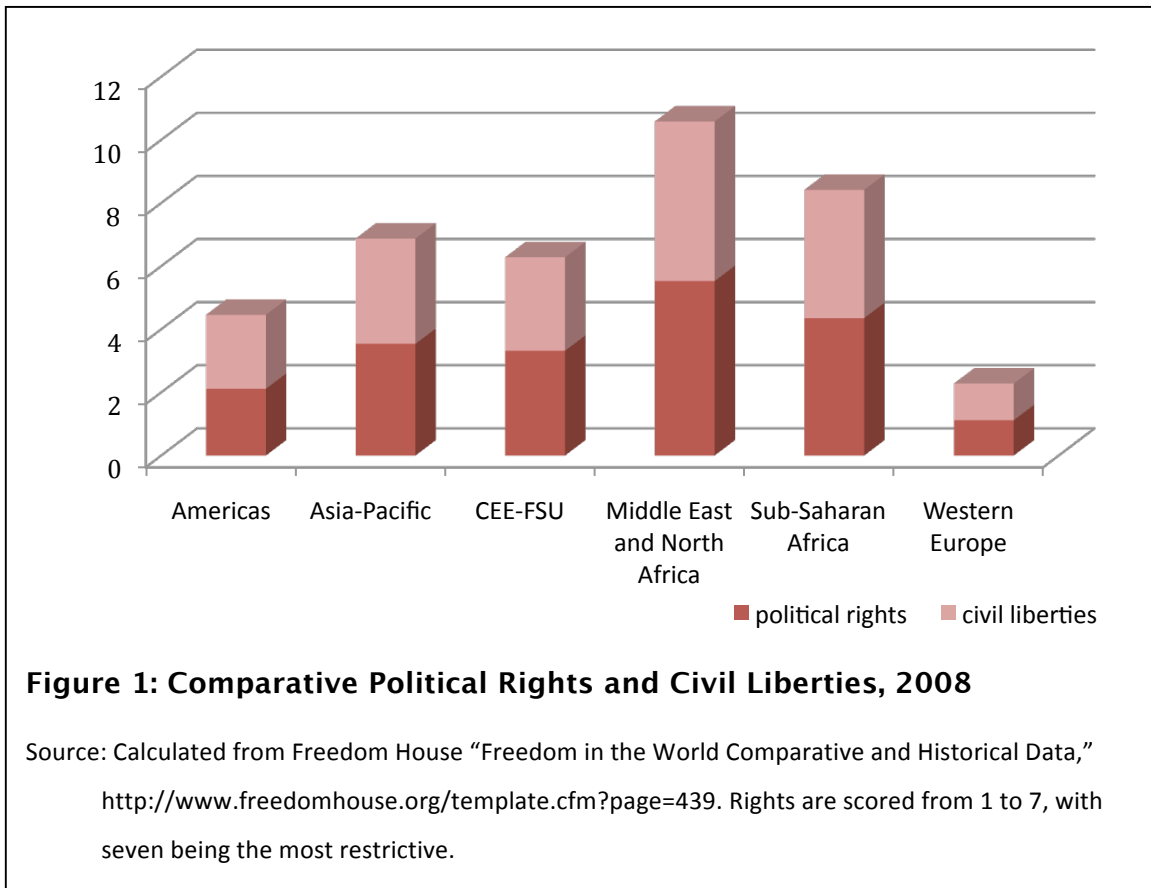
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By almost any qualitative or quantitative measure, the Middle East has proven remarkably resilient to the so-called “third wave” of global democratization (see Figure 1). Authoritarian regimes have persisted, even flourished, despite the declarations by Western countries of greater support for political reform in the region following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (Table 1). Why is this so, and why is it that the region stands in such sharp distinction in this regard?



A number of explanations for this apparent Middle Eastern exceptionalism have been offered. Is Middle Eastern authoritarianism rooted in particular legacies of colonialism and state-formation? Is it a function of the direct and indirect impact of petroleum wealth and rentierism on the regional political economy? Does it arise from high degrees of regional conflict, and the consequent militarization of politics? What role has been played by past Western tolerance of friendly dictatorship? To what extent can authoritarian durability be attributed to the specific survival strategies employed by ruling regimes? Is it a case of the region lacking certain critical “prerequisites” for democracy (whatever those

might be), or rather is it that is over-endowed with factors that contribute to successful authoritarianism?¹

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
political rights	5.68	5.58	5.58	5.42	5.47	5.53	5.53
civil liberties	5.53	5.47	5.21	5.11	5.00	5.00	5.05

Table 1: Average Freedom House Scores of Political Rights and Civil Liberties for the Middle East and North Africa, 2003-2008

Source: Calculated from Freedom House, "Freedom in the World Comparative and Historical Data," with the inclusion of data for the Palestinian territories. Rights are scored from 1 to 7, with seven being the most restrictive.

Perhaps the most controversial explanations have sought to explain the "democracy gap" by reference to some aspect of regional, Arab, and/or Muslim political culture. Theoretically, the appeal of such explanations is clear. Cultural factors would provide an explanation as to why authoritarianism has endured for decades across more than a score of countries that otherwise differ widely in terms of history and economy. Political culture would also appear to offer an explanation why the Middle East stands out from other regions in this regard, and why it has been especially resistant to third wave democratization. Surely so much repression for so long cannot simply be attributed to unusually smart dictators, or to especially clever regime survival strategies that were somehow were beyond the grasp of other, less-gifted authoritarians elsewhere in the world?

At the same time, the very *prima facie* ability of political culture approaches to account for the region-wide persistence of authoritarianism over extended period of time is also one of their major drawbacks. Some critics charge that such explanations potentially lapse into ethnic or religious stereotyping, or the sort of "Orientalism" decried by Edward Said and others. Others charge that despite evidence of general correlation at a national level, the existing attitudinal data at the individual level actually suggests broad popular

¹ Eva Beilin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, 2 (January 2004).

support for democratic governance. Profound questions can also be raised about potentially wide attitudinal variations across state, generation, and social class. Political culture explanations also risk being a residual category of sorts, too—offered to explain patterns of political behavior that do not seem to be accounted for by other, more tangible variables.

This paper reviews the debates over political culture, authoritarian rule, and the prospects for political reform in the Middle East since the 1990s, and assesses whether social scientists are any closer to consensus as to what cultural aspects might have what effects on political development. It examines new light cast on these old debates by the increasing availability of opinion survey data in the region. Finally, it suggests that at least some of the effects attributed to cultural factors might be regional ones instead, rooted in the influence of an authoritarian Middle Eastern neighbourhood.

Essentialists, Contextualists, and Critics

The existing literature on Middle East political culture falls into three broad (if rather fuzzy and overlapping) categories. These might be termed the *essentialists*, the *contextualists*, and the *critics*.

- *Essentialists* see culture as important and determinative, and at least semi-primordial—that is, so deeply rooted in history, religion, and social organization as to be highly resistant to both change and variation. They also tend to conceptualize the Middle East as a single cultural element, with these cultural elements more salient than many of the varied, internal characteristics of individual states. In policy terms, most—although by no means all—have been quite dubious about the prospects for substantial political reform in the region any time soon.
- *Contextualists*, on the other hand, tend to see culture as more varying and variegated, and operating on politics in ways that are far more subtle and mediated. They reject the notion of an “Arab” or “Islamic” culture as a gross overgeneralization, and instead place emphasis on subcultures and the often contradictory and complex ways in which cultural influences are felt on politics. In this view, cultural influences are important, but doctrines are far from immutable. Contextualists also see the interplay between ideas, ideologies, cultural symbols, and material conditions as being important.

- *Critics*, finally, doubt that political cultural factors are especially useful at all in explaining the persistence of authoritarianism. Typically they argue that not only are cultural variables hard to assess, but they are also secondary to more structural determinants like political economy and institutional legacies.

Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind*, first published in 1973, is classic example of the essentialist approach. Patai used various personal and second-hand observations and anecdotes to emphasize a relatively homogenous Arab psychology stretching across the Middle East, rooted in past tribal-survival practices, reinforced by child-rearing practices, and evident in sexual, personal, and social/group behaviors. The result, he argued, is a society prone to conflict and extreme emotion, and unwilling to accept institutional authority.²

Elie Kedourie addressed the issue of Middle East political culture and the prospects even more directly, arguing that what he saw as the pillars of Western democracy—popular sovereignty and suffrage, the rule of law, pluralism, and the secular state—were all “profoundly alien to the Muslim political tradition.”³ Samuel Huntington, in both *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* and even more so in *The Clash of Civilizations*, seemed to attribute considerable scope for violence, and little prospect for democratization, to the Islamic world.⁴ The latter, he argued, was as a culture/civilization, inherently prone to violence: “Islam,” he asserted, “has bloody borders.”⁵ Moreover, like Kedourie, he felt that it lacked the cultural foundations (such as separation of religious and secular authority) upon which Western democracy emerged. Daniel Pipes has long argued, especially in his political essays, that violence is endemic in Arab and especially Muslim political culture.⁶

In addition to focusing on what they see as Islam's supposed non-separation of religion and state, the rigidity of *shari'a* (Islamic law), and the primacy of religious-divine over popular sovereignty, essentialist scholars also emphasize discrimination against

² Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind*, rev. ed. (New York: Hatherleigh Press, 2002)

³ Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), pp. 5-6

⁴ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

⁵ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993).

⁶ See, for example, Daniel Pipes, *The Long Shadow: Culture and Politics in the Middle East*, (New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Books, 1989), as well as many of his essays at <http://www.danielpipes.org>.

women and religious minorities, limited pluralism, an emphasis on order over *fitna* (social chaos), and a long historical tradition of authoritarianism during the Caliphates. Some also emphasize aspects of the region's tribal or Bedouin roots.

In a recent book, Philip Salzman has combined several of these lenses, emphasizing in particular the alleged "tribal DNA" of Middle Eastern societies. In his approach, he argues that the imperatives of past nomadic and tribal existence (such as maximizing offspring and herds) has led to a deep seated impulse for predatory expansion, which in turn was subsumed and spread by Islam.⁷ He suggests that a "balanced opposition" of enduring conflict and feuds between pyramidal kinship groups therefore characterizes Middle Eastern societies. The result, he claims, is antithetical to "constitutional rule in which rules apply to all and are upheld by all at all times. Particularism and contingency, so basic to complementary opposition, preclude universalistic constitutional frameworks and thus inhibit social and political integration at broader territorial levels including larger and diverse populations."⁸ His view of the peoples of the region is one in which violence and despotism seems almost inevitable.

Lawrence Rosen also focuses, in part, on the influence on a "tribal ethic" in Middle East politics, but draws rather different conclusions. He suggests that concepts of time, memory, the person, and relationships are significantly different than in the West, marked by a tendency to focus on persons and personal relationships rather than formalized rules and roles ("persons make institutions, and not the other way around").⁹ At the same time, he is careful to emphasize how actual local practice may differ from formal, textual procedures (for example, in the implementation of Islamic law), as well as the "enormous flexibility" of multifaceted Arab political culture. His argument, therefore, is not that these cultural traits make democratic good governance possible, but rather that the limitation of government authority and the protection of freedoms may involve constitutional models that are somewhat different than those that have accompanied the emergence of liberal democracy in the West.

⁷ Philip Salzman, "The Middle East's Tribal DNA," *Middle East Quarterly* 15, 1 (Winter 2008), online at <http://www.meforum.org/1813/the-middle-east-s-tribal-dna>.

⁸ Philip Carl Salzman, *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Book, 2007), pp. 16-17.

⁹ Lawrence Rosen, "Expecting the Unexpected: Cultural Components of Arab Governance," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 603 (January 2006): 170.

Bernard Lewis has been a particularly influential voice among essentialists for decades. His own views on the relationship between Middle East culture and democracy appear to have undergone significant change over time, however. Long dubious about democratic prospects in the region,¹⁰ and emphasizing the importance of religious-cultural tradition in most of his work, he later came to shift his position and argue that these traditions should not be seen as implacably hostile to democracy in the Middle East. On the contrary, Islam also contained notions of justice, rejection of despotism, popular consultation, and limits on state power. Contemporary Middle Eastern authoritarianism, he argued, “is alien, with no roots in either the classical Arab or the Islamic past, but it is by now a couple of centuries old and is well entrenched, constituting a serious obstacle.” Yet, more recently, “other positive elements of Islamic history and thought could help in the development of democracy. Notably, the idea of consensual, contractual, and limited government is again becoming an issue today. The traditional rejection of despotism, of *istibdad*, has gained a new force and a new urgency: Europe may have disseminated the ideology of dictatorship, but it also spread a corresponding ideology of popular revolt against dictatorship.”¹¹

Most essentialists focus on the qualitative analysis of historical, textual or anthropological data in making their case. However, there have also been a few efforts to assess these issues quantitatively. Steven Fish, for example, has undertaken a cross-national regression analysis of the impact of “Islamic religious tradition” (operationalized as a predominately Muslim population), as well as other possible explanations for authoritarianism/democracy (economic development and performance, sociocultural divisions, British or Communist political heritage).¹² He finds that Islam is, along with level of economic development, a significant and substantial predictor of authoritarianism/democracy. He does not find that Muslim societies have higher levels of violence or lower levels of interpersonal trust (both of which the literature associates with

¹⁰ Ian Buruma, “Lost in Translation: The Two Minds of Bernard Lewis,” *The New Yorker*, 14 June 2004, online at http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/06/14/040614crbo_books.

¹¹ Bernard Lewis, “Freedom and Justice in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2005). For a characteristically pithy statement of the doubts most other essentialists hold about the democratization agenda in the Middle East, see Martin Kramer, “Should America Promote a Liberal, Democratic Middle East?” lecture delivered to the 2002 Weinberg Founders Conference, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, online at <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/Landsdowne2002.htm>.

¹² M. Steven Fish, “Islam and Authoritarianism,” *World Politics* 55 (October 2002): 4-37. It must be said that Fish is a limited and reluctant essentialist, having drawn his conclusions about the importance of cultural variables on the basis of his data analysis rather than *a priori*.

lower levels of democracy). He does find, however, less equality of women in Muslim societies, and a statistical correlation between the status of women and democratic politics. The causal mechanism that would link these is less clear, although Fish does provide several preliminary suggestions.

Daniela Donno and Bruce Russett have reexamined Fish's conclusions on the basis of their own cross-national quantitative analysis. They agree that Islamic countries appear to be less amenable to democracy, but note that the effect is much stronger in Arab than non-Arab countries. They find that Islam impacts negatively on the equality of women especially in Arab countries (and much less so elsewhere), but do not find any particular linkage between gender equality and (authoritarian or democratic) regime type.¹³ This question of an "Arab" versus "Muslim" democracy gap has also been addressed by Alfred Stepan and Graeme Robertson. They argue (like Donno and Russett) that the data suggests that it is far more the former than the latter.¹⁴ Indeed, they note that the significant difference between Arab and non-Arab Muslim societies suggests that religion *per se* has only a very limited role to play in explaining the lack of meaningful electoral competition in so much of the Middle East.¹⁵

While scholars undertaking cross-national quantitative analysis tend to provide evidence that cultural region matters, they do not necessarily reach the conclusion that this means that the Middle East is inherently doomed to an authoritarian future. Donno and Russett, for example, stress that their results uphold a "weak culturalist" view, whereby "while certain elements of democratic culture are required for democracy to take hold, this political culture is not incompatible with any particular religious tradition, since such traditions are malleable or at least subject to reinterpretation."¹⁶ A number of scholars have pointed to the experience of Catholicism to demonstrate the point: although once associated with persistent authoritarianism in southern Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere until

¹³ Daniela Donno and Bruce Russett, "Islam, Authoritarianism, and Female Empowerment: What Are the Linkages?" *World Politics* 56 (July 2004): 582-607.

¹⁴ Alfred Stepan with Graeme Robertson, "An 'Arab' More Than 'Muslim' Electoral Gap," *Journal of Democracy* 14, 3 (July 2003): 30-44.

¹⁵ Stepan and Robertson, "Gap," pp. 39-40. A similar point is made by Arthur Goldsmith, who argues, "individual variation dwarfs many aggregate similarities among Islamic polities." Arthur Goldsmith, "Muslim Exceptionalism: Measuring the 'Democracy Gap'" *Middle East Policy* 14, 2 (Summer 2007): 95.

¹⁶ Donno and Russett, "Islam, Authoritarianism, and Female Empowerment," p. 594. They draw the concept of a "semiculturalist" approach from Adam Przeworski, José Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, "Culture and Democracy," *World Culture Report: Culture, Creativity and Market* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1998).

the 1970s, these regions went on to experience widespread democratic transitions and consolidations.¹⁷ In many ways, both these empirical findings and the Catholic experience points to the sorts of more contingent cultural explanations offered by contextualist scholars of the political culture of the Middle East.

Contextualists often differ substantially from essentialists in their views on the content and effects of religious and other traditions. Islam, they typically observe, also contains principles of consultation (*shura*), social justice, and political responsibility.¹⁸ They note that secularism of past European society is exaggerated (as evidenced by historic role of state churches and official religion), as is its past tolerance (as can be seen by the historic subordination of women, or the Holocaust). Similarly, the supposed non-separation of religion and state is also overclaimed in the Middle East, they suggest. Beyond this, however, contextualists argue that how culture operates on social and political behavior is very much shaped by immediate circumstances, with individuals, political movements, and leaders potentially able to draw upon a broad array of cultural elements in determining or legitimating their actions. In short, they differ not only on the extent of cultural determination, but also with regard to its very nature.

Among contextualists, Michael Hudson's seminal 1977 study *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* integrated political cultural factors (and, in particular, attitudes to group identity and authority) into a broader political analysis. Hudson pointed to both authoritarian and potentially democratic aspects of tribal and Islamic traditions, and emphasized the ways in which modernization and social mobilization had fractured these traditional authority structures. In this analysis, political cultural change, and the multiplicity and complexity of subcultures, was a (but not "the") driving force of politics. Hudson has been critical of many of the analyses offered by essentialists, but at the same

¹⁷ The question remains open whether the democratization of these societies was due to the reforms in the Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), or changes in global, regional and economic context. While the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church makes it more amenable to reform-from-above than does the more decentralized religious authority of Sunni Islam, the latter also provides more opportunities to generate and disseminate alternative theological and political views. Shi'ism fall somewhere between the two in this regard.

¹⁸ John L. Esposito and James P. Piscatori, "Democratization and Islam," *Middle East Journal* 45, 3 (Summer 1991).

time has differed with other critics in his assertion that political culture analysis does have much to offer in understanding Middle East politics.¹⁹

Several authors have sought to tease out the ways in which cultural and non-cultural factors interact in shaping political outcomes. Hisham Sharabi, for example, has argued that Arab societies are characterized by “neopatriarchy,” which stems from the interaction of traditional patriarchalism and modernity in the context of a particular political economy.²⁰ While he did not see culture and social psychological factors as the fundamental prime movers of historical development, he did see their effects as important in shaping political behavior. Lisa Wedeen has examined the cult of personality constructed by the Asad dictatorship(s) in Syria. In explaining the power of public spectacles of obedience, Wedeen does not place emphasis on preexisting cultural attitudes, but rather the ways in which symbolic reassertions of hegemony help to sustain political control. Official ideology thus both reflects and helps shape structural political dynamics.²¹

Brigitte Weiffen has used cross-national quantitative analysis to examine the interaction between (Muslim) religion and high oil exports. Her data leads her to conclude that these two factors interact, such that the combination is far more likely to be associated with authoritarian politics than are the additive effects of culture and political economy alone. While her argument focuses on the role that Islamist mobilization plays during economic downturns, it could also be hypothesized that preexisting socio-cultural patterns render rentier distribution more effective than would be the case in other societies.²²

Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori are typical of scholars who emphasize the complex and multifaceted nature of Islam, and the extent to which individuals and elites are able to draw from a broad range of potential symbols in which to express very different positions. “Doctrine,” they suggest, “is of secondary importance. Muslim politics is not determined by a template of ideas; it is influenced by a number of factors, which, while including scripturally defined precepts, also include national identities, economic

¹⁹ Michael Hudson, the Political Culture Approach to Arab Democratization: the Case for Bringing It Back In, Carefully,” in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble, eds. *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Volume I: Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995).

²⁰ Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

²¹ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²² Brigitte Weiffen, “The Cultural-Economic Syndrome: Impediments to Democracy in the Middle East,” *Comparative Sociology* 3, 3-4 (2004).

circumstances, and social status.”²³ A similar point has been made by Gudrun Kramer, who emphasizes that the political behavior of Islamist movements, and their particular orientation towards issues of pluralism and democracy, is shaped as much or more by the political context within which they operate than the “theoretical” position of Islamic doctrine on such issues.²⁴

Some of the literature on civil society in the Arab world has emphasized the way in which cultural and non-cultural factors have interacted to stunt its growth. This is evident in the work of Mehran Kamrava, for example—with much more emphasis on the role of cultural variables in his earlier writing than later.²⁵

Fouad Ajami might be classed a contextualist, despite the tendency of many of his critics to ascribe to him essentialist views.²⁶ He has argued that the Arab world is trapped within dysfunctional intellectual traditions and political cultures. In particular, in the course of interactions and confrontations with a rapidly modernizing West (and the dislocations of its own modernizing experiences) it first clung to (or invented) a misguided Arab nationalism, and now to Islamist ideologies and movements.²⁷ He does not, however, view this situation as so fundamentally deep-seated as to be resistant to change, even rapid change, in response to both internal and external developments. For this reason, he was a strong supporter of the Bush Administration’s declared (if somewhat transitory) support for Arab democratization. In so doing, he was explicitly critical of those who attributed to the Middle East either immutable Islamic anti-democratic values or Arab exceptionalism.²⁸

²³ Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* rev ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. xvii.

²⁴ Gudrun Krämer, “Islam and Pluralism,” in Brynen, Korany, and Noble, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, Volume I: Theoretical Perspectives, pp. 113-123.

²⁵ Meran Kamrava, *Democracy in the Balance: Culture and Society in the Middle East* (London: Chatham House, 1998). Compare this with his later article on “The Middle East’s Democracy Deficit in Comparative Perspective,” *Perspectives on Global Technology and Development* 6 (2007): 190, in which he suggests that “in helping or hindering democratic transitions, culture in general plays at best a minimal role.”

²⁶ Ajami’s highly rhetorical writing style tends to reinforce perceptions of him as an essentialist. See, for example, “Iraq and the Arab’s Future,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, 1 (January February 2003).

²⁷ Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generations’ Odyssey* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1999).

²⁸ See, for example, Fouad Ajami, “Bush Country: The Middle East embraces democracy--and the American president,” *Wall Street Journal* 22 May 2005, online at <http://www.opinionjournal.com/editorial/feature.html?id=110006721>; “The Promise of Liberty: The ballot is not infallible, but it has broken the Arab pact with tyranny,” *Wall Street Journal*, 7 February 2006, online at www.opinionjournal.com/editorial/feature.html?id=110007932.

Critics, as noted earlier, doubt the feasibility and/or value of political cultural analysis. Perhaps the most powerful and influential critique was that offered by Edward Said in *Orientalism*.²⁹ There he suggested that Western study of the Middle East had been characterized by a perception of the region and its peoples as an alien, unchanging, ahistorical “other.” Methodologically, Orientalism involved excessive reliance on philology, textual accounts of classical Arab-Islamic history, and formal Islamic theology, reflecting an assumption that described patterns of behavior from centuries earlier were innate Middle Eastern characteristics that also explained contemporary politics and society. Said also stressed the extent to which the production of Western knowledge had been shaped by the exigencies of colonial rule and imperial interest, and the ways in which the Middle East had been “represented” through a Eurocentric lens rather than allowed to represent itself. While the bulk of Said’s focus was on the Orientalist literature of the 19th century, the implications for some contemporary scholarship were clear.

Criticism of weaknesses of contemporary scholarship on political culture has been taken up by Lisa Anderson. In contrast to the grand sweep of Said’s reading of intellectual history, her point of departure is very much contemporary social science. Anderson condemned what she viewed as the simplistic stereotypes of a crude essentialist approach. She has warned that although “unusually susceptible to distortions and bias,” political culture perspectives “can be very seductive, particularly to policy-makers looking for short, neat explanations of the complexities they face.” As a consequence, “if we are not careful to specify its context and limits, we not only risk analytical confusion, we set the stage for sloppy, self-indulgent, or even damaging [policy] prescription.”³⁰ In her view, scholars are far better off first focusing on the role of political economy, social class, political institutions, and other structural variables before examining the possible role that psychological and attitudinal factors might play.

The debate over what role political culture does, or does not, play in shaping Middle Eastern politics—and, in particular, its possible role in shaping trajectories of authoritarianism and political reform—was given heightened salience by the terrorist attacks of 9/11, US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the announcement of a “forward agenda for freedom” in the Middle East by then US president George Bush in

²⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* rev. ed. (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1994).

³⁰ Lisa Anderson, “Democracy in the Arab World: A Critique of the Political Culture Approach,” in Brynen, Korany, and Noble, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Volume I: Theoretical Perspectives*, p. 90.

November 2003.³¹ Some critics charged that Bush Administration policy was driven by an excessive reliance on political cultural stereotypes,³² and sustained by a close relationship between leading neoconservatives and scholars such as Lewis and Ajami.³³ Lewis shot back with the charge that Middle East studies had become afflicted by a combination of “political correctness and multiculturalism” that resulted in an “imposed orthodoxy” that made “scholarly discussion of Islam... dangerous” and provided Islam and “Islamic values” with “immunity from criticism.”³⁴ Amid the heightened political sensitivities of the post-9/11 era, therefore, debates over scholarship became bound up with polemics over Middle East policy, to the detriment of both.³⁵

Lost in the fray were many of the analytical issues at stake. What can, and cannot, political culture approaches explain about politics in general, and the persistence of Middle Eastern authoritarianism in particular? To what extent are cultural variables region-wide and slow to change, or to what extent are the variegated, changing, and contextually dependent? Perhaps most important, how do we demonstrate and measure this? These latter methodological issues ought to be at the core of debates over Middle East political culture. Yet, generally, they have generally been oddly absent.

Methodology, Attitudes, and Politics: Knowing What We Know (and Don't)

How do we “know” another culture, and the ways in which that culture shapes political behavior? Perhaps the easiest way of doing so is through the written content that a

³¹ George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy.” Washington DC, 7 November. Text online at <http://www.ned.org/events/anniversary/20thAniv-Bush.html>

³² Lee Smith, “Inside The Arab Mind: What’s wrong with the White House’s book on Arab Nationalism,” *Slate* 27 May 2004, online at <http://slate.msn.com/id/2101328/>; Brian Whitaker, “Its best use is as a doorstep,” *The Guardian*, 24 May 2004, online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/may/24/worlddispatch.usa>

³³ Michael Hirsh, “Bernard Lewis Revisited: What if Islam isn’t an obstacle to democracy in the Middle East but the secret to achieving it?” *Washington Monthly*, November 2004, online at <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2004/0411.hirsh.html>; Adam Shatz, “The Native Informant,” *The Nation*, 28 April 2003, online at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20030428/shatz>

³⁴ Bernard Lewis, “Studying the Other: Different Ways of Looking at the Middle East and Africa,” keynote address to the 2008 annual conference of the Association for the Study of the Middle East Africa, 25 April 2008, online at <http://asmeascholars.org>.

³⁵ See, for example, see Martin Kramer’s highly polemical *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001). For a very different view, see Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

culture produces: its histories, religious documents, political pronouncements, and similar outputs. The dangers in assessing political culture in this way, however, are twofold. First, by focusing on religious and historical texts, there is a danger of reading into contemporary society attitudes that have long ago changed. Moreover, it is far from clear that classic texts either reflect the broader canvas of varying cultural attitudes across social groups, or give adequate voice to subaltern, disadvantaged groups. Would a close textual reading of Old Testament prescriptions regarding, for example, the correct treatment of women and slaves, provide much insight into the politics of (predominantly Judeo-Christian) America?³⁶ Why, then, would one presume that a similar reading of the Qur'an provide insight into how modern culture interacts with politics in the contemporary Middle East? Do the classic works of Shakespeare provide insight into the lives of the 17th century English peasants, let alone contemporary British workers? (Indeed, reading Shakespeare, one would be inclined to the view that Britain is a society incapable of democracy, where murder and treachery are the primary currency of politics.)

This, of course, was part of the methodological foundation of Said's criticism of Orientalism: that by focusing on philology, theology, and the classical history, and doing so in a Eurocentric way, scholars had painted a static, distorted and inaccurate view of the Middle East. Ironically, however, much the same criticism can and has been made of Said's own work, namely that he selected his textual examples of 19th (and 20th) century Western observation and scholarship to make his case, ignoring evidence that might have painted a rather different picture.³⁷

Some of the weaknesses of a textual reading of Middle Eastern culture can be minimized by more systematic sampling techniques, and by focusing on materials that might be more representative of the attitudes and preferences of a variety of groups within the mass public. Doing so has been inhibited in the past by censorship and self-censorship of published materials. Only with the advent of direct broadcast satellite television has the

³⁶ Or to cite a Canadian example, especially appropriate given the authors' shared love of the city of Montréal. The province of Quebec is 83% Catholic, one of the highest rates in the Americas. Despite this, it also has very high rates of public acceptance of same-sex marriage and of common-law (unmarried) couples. Clearly, there are limits to the value of religious affiliation as an explanatory value.

³⁷ Malcolm Kerr, "Review: Edward Said, Orientalism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12 (December 1980): 544-547.

Arab public found a relatively open vehicle for information and debate, in what Marc Lynch has insightfully explored as a new, emerging “Arab public sphere.”³⁸

In addition to inferring political culture from largely textual and theological sources, one can also examine it qualitatively using more anthropological research techniques. Ethnography of this sort provides a potentially far richer description, and—if done well—is far less susceptible to formal and elite biases and open to subaltern voices. Often, close and sustained observation reveals patterns of everyday behavior, rooted in the interaction of culture, institutions, and political economy, that would not otherwise be evident. It also can be keenly sensitive to the ways in which culture is mediated and interpreted through the lens of gender, social class, and locale, and hence cognizant of the many subcultures (and broader cultural repertoires) that are at play.

Methodologically, however, two potential problems arise here. The first is whether the initial ethnography is well done, or itself is blind to the underlying social dynamics. To what extent can individual observation and anecdotal evidence provide a firm enough basis upon which to base broader theories of political psychology? Patai in particular has been criticized for questionable characterizations of Arab social psychology, and alleged child-raising practices and sexual habits, based on scanty evidence of the frequency of these supposed phenomena or their causal connections.

The second issue—and, for the study of regional authoritarianism and reform, one that is particularly important—is the extent one can generalize from the socio-cultural dynamics of one element of society to society as a whole? Salzman, for example, bases some of his analysis of *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* on his 1970s field work with the nomads of Iranian Baluchistan, a process that some might see as analogous to writing about the political dynamics of contemporary American politics and foreign policy based on an analysis of the family behavior of Alaskan fur-trappers. While there is no doubt that clan politics and tribal dynamics shape some aspects of Middle East politics—especially at the local level—it is also the case that only a tiny proportion of the region’s population have any significant links to a nomadic or Bedouin past. The majority of modern Middle Easterners are urban, and many have traditions of urban or sedentary rural social organization that stretch back centuries or even (as in the case of Egypt) millennia.

³⁸ Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

One way of addressing these problems is to complement qualitative political ethnography with quantitative data drawn from opinion surveys. Done well, attitudinal survey data allows one to see how attitudes relate to a variety of other social and economic variables, how clusters of attitudes therefore vary within larger population groups, and how sets of attitudes might be related.

The application of these techniques to the Middle East has long been limited, however, by the authoritarian character of states, and the consequent difficulty and dangers of public opinion polling. Indeed, until the 1990s, many opinion survey-based attitudinal studies were forced to depend on data drawn from university students since it was difficult to secure the necessary permissions from authorities to conduct wider studies. The cross-national World Values Survey (WVS) project, for example, included no Middle East countries at all in its initial wave of polls in 1981-84. In the 1989-93 and 1994-99 series it featured only one Middle Eastern country (Turkey), as well as a few predominantly Muslim countries elsewhere.³⁹

The Palestinian territories were an early exception to this previous pattern, with the onset of the Oslo peace process leading to the establishment of a number of institutions and non-governmental organizations undertaking frequent opinion surveys on a broad range of issues.⁴⁰ The result is a rich body of opinion data—certainly the most extensive in the Arab world—on political and social attitudes, now stretching back more than a decade.

Lately, more data has become available, both because of a degree of political liberalization in some countries, and due to increased interest in Arab and Muslim attitudes by researchers, NGOs, and governments alike in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. International pollsters, such as Gallup, began to undertake large multi-country surveys on attitudes in the Muslim world, as did research projects such as the Pew Global Attitudes Project.⁴¹ The 1999-2004 series of the World Values Surveys included no fewer than eight Middle Eastern countries (Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia). The groundbreaking 2004 UNDP *Arab Development Report* supported its findings with

³⁹ On the World Values Survey project and data, see <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>.

⁴⁰ See, for example, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (<http://www.pcpsr.org/>), the Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre (<http://www.jmcc.org/>), and Near East Consulting (<http://www.neareastconsulting.com>). Data from these and other sources has often been underused by scholars of Palestinian politics, however.

⁴¹ For Gallup's work in this area, see the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies at <http://www.gallup.com/consulting/worldpoll/26410/Gallup-Center-Muslim-Studies.aspx>. For the findings of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, see <http://pewglobal.org>.

extensive opinion survey data from across the region that sought to map how Arab publics conceptualized and prioritized various political, social, and economic freedoms.⁴² The University of Maryland, in conjunction with the polling firm Zogby International, has conducted annual polls since 2003 in several Arab countries, largely on foreign policy issues.⁴³ In 2005, the Arab Barometer project was established at the University of Michigan, in collaboration with counterpart institutions in the Arab world as well as similar other regional Barometer projects on Africa, Asia, and Latin America.⁴⁴ Considerable polling has been done in Iraq, whether by the US military, aid agencies, or the media.

Questions can be raised about some of this data, in terms of both reliability and validity.⁴⁵ Some social groups—women, households without telephones, rural populations—may be underrepresented in poor research designs. In authoritarian countries, and countries with little practice of opinion polling, respondents may be reluctant to share their real views with an unknown outsider. Survey questions may be poorly translated from English to Arabic, or vice versa, or questions may be poorly designed. Some surveys, for example, have asked respondents whether they support either “democratic” or “Islamic” systems of government, thereby implicitly excluding the possibility that many may see these two things as wholly compatible.

More fundamentally, basic questions can be raised about what expressed attitudes represent—are they deep-seated and hence causative of political action, or are they themselves the function of underlying political constraints and opportunities? In the former case, as both essentialists and contextualists would argue, it is worth looking at attitudes to understand current and future politics. In the latter case, however, attitudes become more epiphenomenal, and would expect them to change significantly as underlying structural and institutional conditions change. This debate has been particularly germane to the issue of *legitimacy*, which Michael Hudson (among many others) made a centerpiece of his analysis

⁴² United Nations Development Programme, *Arab Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World* (New York: UNDP, 2005).

⁴³ For these, see the website of the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, University of Maryland, at <http://sadat.umd.edu/surveys/index.htm>

⁴⁴ For further information on the Arab Barometer project, see <http://www.arabbarometer.org/>

⁴⁵ The *reliability* of survey data refers to whether the results of a poll or finding are consistent over multiple opinion samples, or whether the results might be distorted by small sample sizes, poor sampling, biases generated by the interview, or other weaknesses of research design. The *validity* of survey data refers to whether the result actually represents what it is the researcher claims it represents.

of Arab politics.⁴⁶ To understand politics, need we focus a degree of primary attention to how populations view authority, and therefore what sorts of leaders they regard as legitimate and choose to obey? Or is legitimacy irrelevant to stable authoritarianism, in that repression and fear—rather than respect for authority—that leads to compliant behavior?⁴⁷

Quantitative attitudinal analysis cannot fully resolve these questions, although it does shed some light on them. What it can do is dispense with the notion that the notion of democratic governance has only weak popular support in the Middle East. Using WVS data, Ronald Inglehart has found that support for democracy is actually *higher* in Arab countries than in any other region of the world.⁴⁸ He also find support for democracy high across the broader Muslim world, but with significant differences between countries that suggest the important contingent impact of other factors (as contextualists would suggest). Using World Values Survey attitudinal data to examine Huntington's theses about Islam and the "clash of civilizations" in particular, Inglehart and Pippa Norris found only minimal differences between the Islamic and Western worlds on issues of democracy, with much greater differences evident Western European and Islamic countries on the one hand, and post-Soviet countries on the other. In the Islamic world, there was greater support for religious authorities playing a strong societal role, but this differed little from similar attitudes in Africa and Latin America. Finally, he found a very strong difference between the West and other societies, especially Islamic ones, on attitudes towards gender and sexual orientation.⁴⁹

Drawing upon data from both the WVS and the Arab Barometer project, Amaney Jamal and Mark Tessler draw similar conclusions, noting that the proportion of respondents favoring democratic government in their own country ranged from a low of 81% in Algeria to a high of 92% in Morocco in 2006.⁵⁰ There is also little evidence from attitudinal survey data that Islamic religiosity is a strong predictor of attitudes towards democratic

⁴⁶ Hudson, *Arab Politics*, pp. 82-106.

⁴⁷ Adam Przeworski, *Transitions From Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 50-53. For a different critique, see the discussion in Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, pp. 5-11.

⁴⁸ Ronald Inglehart, "The Worldviews of Islamic Publics in Global Perspective," in Mansoor Moaddel, ed. *Worldviews of Islamic Publics* (New York: Palgrave, 2005). Also online at http://margaux.grandvinum.se/SebTest/wvs/SebTest/wvs/articles/folder_published/publication_487/files/5_islamview.pdf.

⁴⁹ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, "Islamic Culture and Democracy: Testing the 'Clash of Civilizations' Thesis," *Comparative Sociology* 1, 3-4 (2002), pp. 259-260.

⁵⁰ Amaney Jamal and Mark Tessler, "Attitudes in the Arab World," *Journal of Democracy* 19, 1 (January 2008), pp. 97-98.

governance.⁵¹ Indeed, the relationship between religious orientations and political views appears to be stronger in the West than it does in the Middle East.⁵² Jamal—in work that highlights the value of empirically investigating theoretical claims—has also found that social trust, long associated in the comparative politics literature with the functioning of successful democracies, may also be associated with stable authoritarianism in non-democratic settings.⁵³

Political Culture, Persistent Authoritarianism, and Political Reform

Where do we stand, therefore, after this brief review of approaches, debates, and recent methodological advances in the study of political culture in the Middle East? And what are the implications of this for future trajectories of authoritarianism and political reform? Several observations can be made.

The first is that the debate over the powerful and enduring—or variable, multivocal and contingent—impact of political cultural variables has become rather stale over the past two decades. Essentialists stress elements of Islamic doctrine (the sovereignty of God, the relatively unchanging nature of *shari'a* (Islamic law), a lack of secularism and separation of church and state, attitudes to women and non-Muslims) and Arab/Middle Eastern culture (tribalism, kinship-based politics, patrimonialism, ethnosectarianism), and then attribute much of the region's enduring authoritarianism to them. Contextualists suggest a broader array of cultural values, many of them potentially conducive to democratic politics (principles of consultation in Islam, and limits on the power of rulers; notions of reciprocal social obligation and accountability in tribal politics; the global spread of democratic norms). They also emphasize that the salience of cultural variables is contextually dependent, and that their effects can only be understood in tandem with non-cultural variables. Although good qualitative scholarship should, in principle, help to determine

⁵¹ Mark Tessler, "Do Islamic Orientations Influence Attitudes Toward Democracy in the Arab World: Evidence from Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 43 (2002): 229-249. The same study found only relatively weak and/or sporadic associations between demographic variables (such as gender, age, residential locale, education, and income) and attitudes to democracy.

⁵² Mark Tessler, "Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: The Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes Toward Democracy in Four Arab Countries," *Comparative Politics* 34 (April 2002).

⁵³ Amaney Jamal, "When Is Trust a Desirable Outcome? Examining Levels of Trust in the Arab World," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, 11 (November 2007). For an excellent examination of the two-edged effects of social capital (buttressing obedience to authoritarianism, rather than sustaining pluralism and cooperation), see also Amaney Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy: The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

which theoretical claims are stronger, in practice neither side is much swayed by the case studies of the other.

The large-n quantitative turn in comparative politics, although replete with many potential pitfalls, provides an opportunity to cast new light on this old debate. Here, however, the findings appear contradictory. Cross-national studies using country-level data seem to suggest that Islam is somewhat associated with more authoritarian political systems, and the Arab world is particularly so. These findings hold true even when variables such as level of economic development, oil rents, and militarized conflict are accounted for. On the other hand, attitudinal data shows a completely different picture: neither Muslims nor Arabs are hostile to democratic governance—on the contrary, they are strongly supportive of them. How can this apparent paradox be explained?

One possibility is that many of the cross-national country studies are conflating cultural group with geographic region, and that some of the authoritarian persistence that is evident is due to neighborhood influences rather than shared political culture. It seems likely, for example, that not only do successful democratic openings have demonstration and domino effects, but so too do cases of dramatic repression (Syria, 1982) or failed political transitions (up to 200,000 dead in the Algerian civil war, 1991-c2006). The bloody ongoing civil strife in Iraq (2003-), with its almost 100,000 civilians dead, and over 4 million displaced or refugees, is hardly likely to have acted as a positive role model either. Certainly the dictators of the region have little interest in encouraging democratic change among their neighbors.⁵⁴ Many citizens, moreover, may have little interest in risking their relatively stable, secure, but authoritarian status quo for an uncertain future, whatever the abstract appeal of democracy—especially in a region where the *mukabarat* (secret police) state can be so brutally efficient.

There is no clear support for this in analysis of attitudinal data to date, in part because existing surveys have not been designed to probe the issue. Research on how attitudes and behavior are shaped by the twin deterrent effects of local repression and neighboring instability and violence might provide an interesting avenue for future empirical enquiry. Jamal and Tessler do find that “majorities in the Arab world attach higher

⁵⁴ On the positive effects that democratic and democratizing neighbors can have, see Jon Powerhouse, *Democracy from Above: Regional Organizations and Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Daniel Brinks and Michael Coppedge, “Diffusion is No Illusion: Neighbor Emulation in the Third Wave of Democratization,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 39, 4 (2006): 463-489.

priority to solving economic problems than to securing the rights and freedoms association,” and were “much more likely to be critical of their government for poor economic performance than for a lack of freedom.”⁵⁵ This may suggest that much of society holds priorities other than rapid and potentially destabilizing political change.

Finally, the consistent attitudinal finding that the degree of a respondent’s religiosity has no significant impact on their views about democracy⁵⁶ does, even allowing for the different ways respondents may conceptualize democracy, suggest that there is no essential connection between Islam and political authoritarianism or democracy, and that the effects of cultural factors are heavily mediated by other, non-cultural variables. Similar analysis has not yet been done regarding the supposed influence of “tribal” traditions, although surveys typically find that such demographic variables as youth, higher education, and urban residence—all, it might be argued, are associated with a weaker attachment to tradition—have little or no significant impact on attitudes to democracy. This would suggest that tribal heritage does not have the all-encompassing causal influence that some essentialists assert.⁵⁷

What are the implications of all this for political reform? Without a fuller understanding of how contextual conditions shape and reshape cultural effects, it is difficult to say. It is possible to say, however, that pessimistic prognoses based solely on the alleged authoritarian or conflictual character of Arab or Islamic culture(s) seem rest on very weak foundations. It may also be the case that what has been lacking in the region is a galvanizing event that shifts passive but pro-democratic citizens into a more activist frame. The Bush Administration intended Iraq, rhetorically at least, to be such a “democratic domino.” For reasons relating to its mode (external intervention), initiator (an unpopular US) and consequences (bloody strife and terrorism) it was an unsuccessful and less-than appealing model. However, substantial reform elsewhere in the Middle East, especially reform driven by popular mobilization and disseminated by Arab satellite television, might well have more substantial regional effects.

⁵⁵ Jamal and Tessler, “Attitudes in the Arab World,” p. 99.

⁵⁶ Tessler, “Do Islamic Orientations Influence Attitudes Toward Democracy in the Arab World.”

⁵⁷ Mark Tessler, “The View from the Street: The Attitudes and Values of Ordinary Egyptians,” *Journal of North African Studies* 9, 2 (Summer 2004): 192.