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**APPLES AND ORANGES: IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY,  
AND STATE IN THE ARAB WORLD***Rami G. Khouri*

The Arab world is experiencing its most turbulent domestic political period since perhaps the 1920s. Looking beneath the headline-grabbing wars, foreign invasions, and militia-backed confrontations and rebellions reveals a kaleidoscopic array of personal and collective indigenous identities, political movements, and ideological forces, alongside regional and global dynamics. All of these interact in a confusing landscape that offers neither regular patterns nor predictable outcomes. State nationalism, pan-Arabism, Islamism, Shiite empowerment, Kurdish nationalism, Christian self-assertion, globalization, tribalism, democratization, human rights activism, and other forces coexist. Led by presidents and rulers of sovereign states, sub-national ethnic and tribal leaders, and local militias and warlords, these identities and forces compete for the allegiance of a predominantly Arab population in the Middle East that has not had the opportunity to freely express its political sentiments or affirm its identities for many decades, perhaps even centuries. In the transition from Ottoman to European control and then gradually to independence, most Arab citizenries did not have the opportunity to define their own state borders or craft their own governance systems. The principle of the consent of the governed has rarely been implemented in the modern Arab world. The turbulence and dynamism in the region today perhaps reflect the desire of many people to make up for a lost century of political self-expression.

The Iraq war, the American-led “global war on terror,” and the 9/11 attacks all played a role in bringing this about, but the most important event that launched the complex political dynamics of the contemporary Arab world was the end of the Cold War around 1990. As the global ideological lids that had constrained the Middle East for a half century (the Iranian revolution being the notable exception) were removed, a wide range of sentiments, ideologies, and movements that had been forbidden or held in check underground suddenly had an opportunity for public expression. After 1990, the Arab world was defined by newly liberated expressions of identity and ideology that could compete in public for citizen support. Tribalism, religion, democratization, economic globalization, and other forces operated alongside persistent status quo forces that carried over from previous decades, including centralized state authoritarianism, security-based control systems, corporate-tribal alliances, quasi-liberal monarchies, and family-anchored elite leaderships. A rainbow of new political expression appeared, in an arena where old autocratic forces still mostly defined the playing field.

To fully understand the nature and meaning of current events in the Arab world, it is critically important to acknowledge that very different categories of phenomena—ideologies, identities, and governance systems—are at play in the region. Personal/tribal identity, religion, nationhood, statehood, and governance system are five different spheres of life and society, and all five of them are changing and interacting simultaneously throughout the region. Like apples and oranges, they cannot be compared or juxtaposed as elements of a single analytical framework. The configuration of states and the legitimacy of nations comprise one level of analysis and change. Society and state are also defined by forces of collective identity, such as tribalism, religion, ethnicity, and ethno-nationalism, which form a second level of analysis. These different elements of statehood, nationhood, and demographic identity usually do not coincide within most of the modern Arab states that the European powers created early in the twentieth century, which explains many of the region's chronic tensions. A third level of analysis is the governance system, such as democracy, federalism, decentralization, or consensus-based consociationalism.\* Underlying principles of society and governance, such as secularism versus religiosity or individual versus collective rights, constitute a fourth element of analysis. The Arab world is dynamic, turbulent, and violent because for the first time in modern history many of its people have the opportunity to speak out on and help to sort out these ideologies, identities, and governance systems and to configure and define themselves.

To make things more complicated, a fifth layer of analysis has become more pertinent since the post-9/11 American-led global war on terror: many people throughout the region see themselves as struggling to attain genuine sovereignty and to free themselves from foreign tutelage, influence, or hegemony. This local struggle for self-expression and self-definition in the Arab world takes place in parallel with a larger global struggle for self-determination.

This paper discusses each of these strands and concludes with portraits of two Islamist movements that illustrate distinct contemporary trends.

### LIMITED LIBERALIZATION AND EMERGING CHANGE

The first stirrings of change occurred in the Arab world in the 1970s, as local movements started criticizing governments for policies that did not translate the post-1973 oil boom into equitable economic opportunities, but instead allowed corruption and inflation to take hold. This was the genesis of the contemporary Islamist movements that have challenged many Arab regimes. Declining external fiscal support, combined with the post-1986 drop in oil prices and increasing population pressures, forced many governments to liberalize their political and economic systems to some

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\* A political arrangement in which various groups, such as ethnic or racial populations within a country or region, share power according to an agreed formula or mechanism.

extent. More open systems were the price that autocratic regimes had to pay as they implemented harsh economic adjustment policies that allowed them to remain in power. The consequence was that in the 15 years from 1986 to 2001, the Arab region experienced small and sporadic instances of democratization and political liberalization. Sudan, Yemen, Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco, and other countries saw the birth of hundreds of new newspapers, thousands of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and scores of political parties, all of which participated in a string of parliamentary and local elections. Most of these phenomena reflected rich identities and traditions—religious, tribal, ethnic, and ideological—that were national, regional, and transnational.

The most successful of the new groups were mainstream political Islamists, who tapped public resentment of the security state system that had slowly come to define and control many Arab societies in the previous two generations. The modern Arab security state was a powerful and persistent phenomenon that came into being after military coups saw army officers take power in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s. The security threats resulting from the 1948 war and the creation of Israel, combined with Cold War–anchored support from abroad, prompted both Arab “republics” and monarchies to depend increasingly on their armed forces and internal security systems for national security, social stability, and regime incumbency. The 1967 Arab defeat by Israel ushered in a new generation of unelected military leaders in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and other countries, and the post-1973 oil-fueled boom provided cash resources with which such authoritarian regimes cemented their grip on power. Some of the military leaders, or their sons, still rule today, usually relying on a pervasive, professional security system to thwart any opposition. The modern Arab security state has occasionally been challenged domestically, but always without success.

The forced loosening of tight state controls that occurred in the 1986–2001 period allowed indigenous Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the newly formed Hamas and Hizbullah to show their strength. Tribal forces were not far behind. But few of the new political groups in the Arab world had any impact on the exercise of political power, because although the political process was liberalized, the substance of decision making was not. Liberalization and democratization proved to be limited in scope and content. Incumbent regimes allowed their citizens to vote, run for office, form parties and civil society organizations, and speak out in the media. These new opportunities occurred, however, within electoral systems and political contexts that were carefully controlled by the state. Thus, opposition groups could be represented in parliament and the cabinet but could not muster the majority needed to change long-standing government policies. The combination of new opportunities to exercise freedoms of expression and association and to sit in formal state institutions with the lack of any effect on policy had two main consequences. In the short run, it diffused tensions and pressures that were building in society and reduced the vulnerability of some regimes; in the longer run, though, the exercise of electoral politics without any real power

generated new frustrations among many citizens and political groups. These sentiments would translate themselves in the years ahead into political realities such as renewed support for Islamists, the growth of militias, greater demands for real democratization, emigration by many educated youth, and a small stream of converts to terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda.

Iraq has repeated this process in the past four years, since the removal of the Baathist regime by the Anglo-American invasion unleashed indigenous political and social sentiments that had been bottled up since the 1960s. Citizens who were suddenly more free to express themselves created a marketplace of identities, ideas, and ideologies. The lack of an institutional framework for the state after the removal of the Baathist-dominated structure unfortunately meant that an opportunity for a healthy and peaceful debate on state re-formation among Iraqis was lost. The process of expressing identity, configuring political power alliances, and reestablishing a functioning government based on power sharing and consensus has been erratic, often violent, in Iraq. This has been exacerbated by three separate sources of grievances that often result in systematic violence: internal power-sharing feuds among Iraqis, regional forces that intervene in Iraq (such as terrorists linked to Al-Qaeda or pro-Iranian groups), and the intense resentment against the American-led foreign forces that dominate the country.

In this difficult context, Iraqi Kurds, Shias, Sunnis, Assyrians, Christians, and others ponder how to preserve their rights as citizens in a now fractured state. Democratic activists and human rights advocates persevere in their quest for the rule of law. Constitutionalist work hard to create a credible republican and federal system, against great odds. Religious and ethnic identities manifest themselves powerfully, as do tribal loyalties and fealty to transnational forces, including terrorism, global capitalism, pan-Islamism, and even pan-Arabism (exemplified in widespread Iraqi reluctance to go against the Arab consensus on contacts with Israel).

The shape of things to come in Iraq and in the entire Arab world will reflect how religious, tribal, national, regional, and ethnic identities are integrated into a national political system that incorporates all parties, yet also fairly reflects real power balances.

## **A WIDE RANGE OF GRIEVANCES**

Two main reasons explain the tensions that prevail throughout the region, keeping in mind the significant subregional differences in culture and history among the Levant, the Persian Gulf states, the Nile Valley, and North Africa. The first reason for political and national turbulence in the Arab world is that most existing Arab states were not created or configured by the self-determining will of their own citizens or validated by democratic and accountable mechanisms of governance. State, religious, tribal, and ethnic boundaries do not coincide in many Arab countries, creating chronic majority/minority tensions that are exacerbated by the abuse

of power by ruling elites. Some ruling powers are religious or tribal minorities that do not necessarily enjoy mass popular legitimacy.

The second reason for turbulence is that the majority of Arabs in the past half century have experienced very erratic state development and have been denied political and personal rights. In most countries, the majority of citizens hold a range of serious and legitimate grievances against their own state, as well as against foreign countries. Unable to find redress of grievances in the institutions of statehood and citizenship, many people turn to subaltern identities—tribe, religion, ethnicity, village, neighborhood, and militia—that have functioned effectively for millennia in some cases. These provide identity, protection, and solace, as well as fill the critical need to have a means of collective expression for political interaction with other groups in society.

The tensions, pressures, and concerns that drive the sentiments and actions of ordinary Arabs throughout the Middle East are noteworthy for not having changed very significantly in recent decades and for spanning so many domains that define people's lives—political, social, economic, security, and environmental. Many problems are connected and cannot be dealt with separately. For example, environmental stress (water shortages, pollution) cannot be separated from corrupt or inefficient authoritarian governance, which in turn cannot be separated from foreign support of the ruling autocrats. The following are the main grievances that drive citizen concern and political activism in many Arab countries:

1. The Arab-Israeli conflict, which provided a justification for autocratic rulers to avoid democratic transformations and establish security-minded regimes. In the late 1940s and beyond, many Arab military regimes that took power through coups justified their nondemocratic control by arguing that the conflict with Israel made security a greater priority than democracy. Early indigenous Arab stirrings for democracy and liberalism in the 1920s and 1930s were blunted and then eradicated by the 1940s and 1950s. The Arab-Israeli conflict also generated repeated and cumulative feelings of humiliation, which eroded the credibility of many regimes and fostered opposition and radical movements throughout the region.
2. Foreign occupations and invading armies that continue to impact the Arab world. Some Middle Eastern countries are currently subjected to sanctions, regime changes, and other foreign threats.
3. A sense of humiliation in relation to foreign powers. This feeling is widespread in Arab societies, especially in the sense that major Western powers apply a double standard to Arabs and Israelis when it comes to compliance with international law and UN resolutions.
4. The legacy of autocratic, sometimes authoritarian, rule that usually enjoyed the explicit, sustained support of foreign governments, including the two superpowers during the Cold War era, and that degraded the self-respect of many citizens.

5. The post–World War I colonial legacy that made it virtually impossible for Arab public opinion to manifest itself or engage in a process of self-determination, because colonial authorities usually transferred political and military power to hand-picked local elites. Those elites quickly consolidated their grip on power or were overthrown by military coups. Rarely has an Arab citizenry democratically elected or consultatively chosen its leaders in a credible, legitimate political process. Islamism and tribalism had mass appeal as a readily available, indigenous means to compensate for this.
6. Economic stagnation that has plagued many countries since the mid-1980s. As population growth outpaced economic expansion, real per capita incomes either stagnated or even declined (except in oil-fueled economies).
7. Corruption, abuse of power, and mismanagement that became increasingly prevalent. Ruling elites and families consolidated their grip on power after the early 1970s, when oil income significantly expanded the capacity of security-minded ruling elites to remain in power for decades.
8. Petty indignities that plague ordinary citizens in their interactions with the state. Many small indignities make people feel that their voice is not heard, their opinions do not matter, and their rights as citizens are not honored in a society where power is unjustly exploited by a small, nonaccountable elite.

## ECONOMIC STRESS AND POLITICAL TENSIONS

Deteriorating or stagnant economic conditions are an important underlying reason for the growth of political movements based on ideologies and identities that often challenge, or exist in parallel with, the central state. The annual Unified Arab Economic Report confirms worrying economic trends that drive tens, perhaps hundreds, of millions of concerned citizens to seek political change that can better respond to their basic human and developmental needs. The statistics for all Arab countries where data could be collected for the 2001 report (Iraq, Palestine, and Somalia are excluded in many cases, because of their battered condition) indicate that real living standards in the Arab world remained essentially stagnant or declined in real terms in most cases in the two decades from 1980 to 2000. The real gross domestic product (GDP) per person (current prices) in the Arab world as a whole was US\$2,469 in 2001, a drop from US\$2,578 in 2000 and from US\$2,612 in 1980. If these figures are adjusted for inflation and declines in foreign exchange value since 1980, the average income of the average Arab citizen dropped substantially in real terms.

Even these figures are deceptive, however, because they aggregate the oil-producing Arab states that have relatively small populations with the poorer Arab states that have large populations. In six relatively low-income, large-population Arab states (Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen), the average per capita GDP for the 194 million citizens ranged between US\$900 and US\$1,040 in the period 1995–2001. Adding war-ravaged Palestine, Iraq, and Somalia to the mix

would make average income drop even further. If these figures were adjusted for inflation and declines in foreign exchange value, they would drop even more. For example, in that pivotal decade of political change, between 1985 and 1995, the per capita GDP in Jordan declined by 16 percent, from 748 to 626 dinars. When this is calculated in constant dollar terms, however, the actual decline in the purchasing power of an average citizen was a much steeper 59 percent—from US\$2,244 to US\$908—mainly due to the dinar’s devaluation in that period. Calculating per capita income in dollar terms is relevant because Jordanian and other Arab economies rely heavily on imported goods, basic as well as luxury items.

The stark political meaning of this is that about three-fourths of all Arab people are poor and have been getting steadily poorer in the last two decades, a period when virtually no Arab citizenry has been able to freely elect its leadership and hold it accountable in a credible manner. The net result is massive and cumulative inner tensions that drive many Arabs to despair, some to revolt, others to emigrate, and a handful to resort to criminality and terrorism.

## PERSISTENT AUTOCRACY AND CHRONIC CRISES

Since the 1960s, security-minded governments and states have dominated most aspects of life in Arab countries. External powers usually helped to perpetuate this autocracy, and civil society and the private sector have been largely contained and controlled by the state. Ordinary men and women have had few, if any, opportunities to express themselves, let alone to work for better governance or greater socioeconomic equity. Most people have responded by expressing their complaints and wishes in the language of religion or culture; they speak of their right to “justice and dignity,” rather than use the language of democratic republicanism. The challenges facing the Arab state can be summed up in terms of five fundamental crises that plague this region. They are interrelated and have developed over decades of erratic statehood:

1. *A crisis of sustainable human development.* Good progress in expanding basic services in the early decades of statehood has been replaced since the mid-1980s by stagnation and disparity in many sectors for the majority of Arabs (other than in the oil-fueled states).
2. *A crisis of sensible and stable statehood.* Few Arab countries are immune from civil war, rebellions, border conflicts, terror, and widespread emigration impulses.
3. *A crisis of citizenship rights.* Public power is exercised by small groups of unelected, unaccountable people who use force at will, leaving the ordinary citizen unclear about his or her place in society and civil and political rights.
4. *A crisis of identities.* The modern state, pan-Arabism, Islam, other religions, tribalism, ethnicity, regional affiliations, gangsterism, commercialism, democracy, resistance, terrorism, and other transnationalisms all

compete for authenticity and supremacy, at the personal, communal, and national levels.

5. *A crisis of coexistence with Israel, other regional powers (Turkey and Iran), and Western powers (mainly the United States and the United Kingdom).* There is no consensus on whether these powers are friends or foes, or both.

The bond of citizen-state relations is badly broken in many Arab countries. Not a single Arab country to date has adequately resolved any of these five crises in a sustainable manner. For instance, few if any Arab citizenries have had an opportunity to define the broad parameters of their statehood or nationhood. Most Arab countries had their borders defined by retreating European colonial powers, and Arabs have been largely absent from the process of defining their own statehood. This is one reason why so many Arab countries have serious internal tensions due to religion, ideology, and/or ethnicity. Simultaneously, few if any Arab citizenries have had the freedom to define their systems of governance, representation, and accountability, taking into consideration important issues such as cultural and ethnic pluralism and establishing realistic balances between religion and secularism, gender roles and rights, state power and individual rights, and central government and provincial authority. Most of the formative decisions that define the geography, demography, and governance systems of entire countries have been made by foreign powers or by local elites who were installed by foreign powers or took power by force.

The cases of Iraq and Lebanon suggest that the chronic crises of the modern Arab world will not be resolved by foreign armies or local militias. The answer to Arab crises is not to perpetuate their underlying causes—foreign armies, local autocrats, populist demagogues, rampant human despair, and fragile national institutions. The answer lies in granting the Arab people the opportunity to exercise their right of self-determination and to decide once and for all the most appropriate balance in their lands among the tribe, the gun, the law, the state, the foreign power, and the divine.

## CULTURAL FACTORS DRIVING POLITICAL CHANGE

Not surprisingly, election results throughout the Middle East since the late 1980s, along with public opinion polls and the media, clearly indicate a strong desire for change among the peoples of the region. That change can happen most smoothly and naturally if it reflects indigenous values, rather than communities imagined in the minds of Western politicians and generals. Political transformation throughout the Middle East must take into account some key differences between Arab and American cultures:

1. Americans probably value freedom above all other attributes, while most Arab societies stress the dignity of the individual more than his or her lib-

erty. Dignity is defined and perceived as comprising the same range of values and rights that define democracy in the United States and the Western world: participation in political life and decision making, a sense of social and economic justice, equal opportunities for all young people in education and employment, and application of the rule of law equally and fairly to all individuals.

2. Americans organize their society and governance systems primarily on the basis of the rights of the individual, while Arabs define themselves and their societies primarily through collective identities, such as family, tribe, ethnic group, and religion. Americans tend to stress society's obligation to ensure the individual's rights to do as he or she pleases, within the limits of the law; Arabs tend to focus more on the obligation of the individual to fulfill his or her responsibilities to the family and wider community and to accept that individuals forfeit some of their personal rights in order to maximize the solidarity and power of their collective group. The importance of recognizing communal or group rights in pluralistic societies is reflected in the fact that some Arab countries (Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt) apply quotas or guarantee parliamentary seats for some minorities.
3. The United States is a secular society, while religion has played an increasingly important public role in most Arab and Middle Eastern societies in recent years. Religion does not necessarily formally organize public governance, but it has always been, and remains, one of the most powerful and legitimate means of expressing discontent and demanding change at the local or national level. In some Arab societies, especially among Islamists, religious values are replacing the secular ideologies that defined these societies in their formative decades, between the 1920s and 1960s. Empirical data from a 2005 public opinion poll by the leading American pollster Zogby International, based on face-to-face interviews in Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), revealed some nuanced attitudes toward the role of religion in public life. Three particularly relevant findings were that Arabs and Muslims in this region hold a very wide range of views on religion's role in their lives and do not share monolithic perspectives, that religion is seen as an important part of people's identities that should find expression in business and governance in a manner that raises the quality of life, and that people should continue to interpret religious law and its everyday applications.
4. The United States is predominantly an immigrant society with a short collective historical memory, while Middle Eastern cultures are deeply defined by their historical memories and past experiences. Immigration and migrant populations have become more important phenomena in the Arab region since the oil-fueled development boom began in the early 1970s. Millions of Asians and Arabs who relocated to oil-rich Arab countries to find work have not had the same impact on social and political systems as have immigrants in Western countries. Most migrants in the Middle East

are contracted laborers or professionals who see themselves as temporary residents in their host countries. They can spend 3 to 30 years earning, saving, and remitting money to their families back home, without expecting political or other rights in their host countries. Migrant workers and their families are expected to find political expression in their home, not their host, countries. The sole issue that occasionally rears its head relates to the rights of migrant workers to be treated fairly and decently, in terms of wages, living conditions, and basic work-related rights (rest days, safety, working hours, insurance, etc.).

5. In most Arab societies, the give-and-take of negotiated political relationships, power sharing, wealth distribution, and access to public resources takes place in the private realm, out of sight of the media and the institutions of statehood. Parliaments and judiciaries are mostly nominal or even decorative institutions, devoid of real power. In the United States and other Western societies, political contestation and power struggles are more routinely manifested in public, including in the media and parliaments.
6. A significant new issue that has created contention between many Arabs and Americans is the importance of democracy. The United States and others have turned to military action to install democratic systems in Iraq (and Afghanistan), arguing that democracy will provide the kind of stability and prosperity that the Middle East has largely lacked in modern times. Many in the Arab world admit that democracy is indeed a desirable goal, but they see true sovereignty and legitimate governments in their countries—free from foreign manipulation—as much more urgent priorities.

## IDEOLOGICAL FORCES AND POLITICAL CHANGE

Islamist movements pushing for change and better governance, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hizbullah, and the Justice and Development Party in Morocco and Turkey, have emerged in recent decades as the most powerful organized political force affecting Middle Eastern public opinion. But they are only one of the forces that compete for citizen allegiance throughout the region. Today, a decade and a half after the end of the Cold War, there are at least seven main ideological forces operating in the Middle East. They are of very unequal strength, and they continue to evolve from traditional to contemporary forms as they keep up with changing circumstances:

1. *Mainstream Islamists.* This is the largest single constituency in the region, comprising relatively moderate, mostly nonviolent, Islamist movements such as Hamas, Hizbullah, and the Muslim Brotherhood, which now engage in democratic elections. They use armed violence to repel foreign (mostly Israeli) occupation and, in the past, sometimes violently challenged their own regimes in Syria, Egypt, Algeria, and other lands.

2. *Terrorist groups.* A small number of Arabs, Pakistanis, Afghans, and citizens of other lands—including Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Fateh el-Islam in Lebanon, and others of that ilk—have broken away from mainstream political Islamism and adopted confrontation and terrorism as vehicles for political expression. These radical Salafist\* militants draw on the same sources of mass resentment and sense of marginalization that plague most Arab citizenries and feed the mainstream, nonviolent Islamist movements, such as corruption, chronic foreign interference in the region, Israeli occupation and aggression, and a sense of loss of human dignity by ordinary citizens. While mainstream Islamists generally work within national political systems and seek to share power and change policy, the Salafist militant groups tend to appeal to individuals who have become detached from their national or local anchorage and see themselves engaged in a global defensive jihad to save Islamic societies from foreign domination and domestic misdirection.
3. *American-led Western hegemony.* This movement, which began to grow after the end of the Cold War and has strengthened since 9/11, aims to transform the Middle East into a set of Western-friendly societies that are free to spend their money and run their internal affairs as they wish (e.g., family-run monarchies, tribal-run police states, security-run oligarchies, father-and-son “kleptocracies”) as long as they eschew terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and pestering Israel. Libya, Qatar, Jordan, and Egypt are relevant examples.
4. *Anti-American, anti-imperial defiance.* This is the oldest continuous ideological force in the region, dating from a century ago, when various Arabs rebelled against European, Ottoman, and, to a limited extent, Zionist power in the region. Syria, Sudan, Hamas, Hizbullah, and some other Arab entities champion this idea once again, mainly targeting the United States. In some cases, this anti-imperial sentiment links with solidarity movements in other parts of the world, especially Europe, Iran, and Latin America.
5. *Home-grown Arab democracy and the rule of law.* This is the most recent and weakest ideology in the Arab world, represented by civil society activists and others who demand more participatory, accountable governance systems based on the rule of law. This fledgling force is exerted by citizens who have grown weary of and humiliated by their own country’s stagnation, autocracy, police state, corruption, mismanagement, and deference to foreign dictates. Some indigenous democracy and human rights movements

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\* Salafism refers to the political and social expression of an Islamic fundamentalist school of thought that idealizes and seeks to restore the fundamental values of early-age Islam, seen as having been intellectually and socially corrupted by religious and political influences since then. While it is often used interchangeably with jihadism or Wahhabism, Salafism in reality is at the origins of various political and religious movements, ranging from the reformist to the violent.

are deeply influenced by Western models, and logistically and financially supported by Western governments and multinational agencies. This has proved to be problematic for some groups (e.g., in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Sudan, and Jordan), which have been accused of promoting foreign goals and have found themselves criticized, ostracized, or hounded by governments and other political forces. An important dimension of democratization in the Arab world is its slow convergence with mainstream Islamism, as groups such as Hamas, Hizbullah, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Action Front, the Islah Party, and the Justice and Development Party see democratic electoral politics as their route to power.

6. *Tribal loyalties.* Such loyalties are the most ancient form of collective identity in the Middle East, predating Islamic religious values, and they continue to have an effect on political systems that increasingly allow people to organize, express themselves, and vote. Kuwait, Yemen, and Jordan offer the best examples of political systems that liberalized and held elections and found their parliaments dominated by tribal candidates rather than representatives of ideological or political movements.
7. *Pan-Arabism.* This ideology remains a real but subdued force in the region, having been replaced by Islamism as the dominant populist ideology. Yet the discourse of leading Islamists, such as Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, is tinged with implicitly pan-Arabist references to the collective American-Israeli threat faced by all Arabs and to the need for Arabs to join hands in resisting foreign hegemonic aims and in supporting the Palestinians. Pan-Arabism is an amorphous, intangible sentiment that is fairly common among ordinary citizens (as manifested by party platforms, public opinion polls, and mass media pronouncements) but is no longer championed by state authorities as it was in the 1950s and 1960s by Gamal Abdel Nasser. It was discredited to a large extent by the brutal police state character of many regimes that waved the banner of Arab nationalism in the 1960s and thereafter.

Given the relative strengths of these ideological forces, parliamentary elections in Arab countries predictably result in victories by three main groups: Islamists, incumbent regimes and parties, and centrist tribalists (who tend to be close to the regimes). It is no accident that in his final desperate years, Saddam Hussein attempted to shore up his regime's weakening legitimacy by appealing to precisely these three forces: the security state, tribalism, and Islamism. He understood which forces enjoyed the most power and legitimacy among the public.

Today's strong Islamist movements are not a new or sudden phenomenon. In fact, the current wave of Islamist political movements that is contesting and often winning elections in the region is the third wave of Islamism since the 1970s, and probably the most important one. The first wave, in the 1970s, engaged and challenged Arab regimes largely in the form of clandestine opposition movements or

grass-roots social organizations in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Sudan, Syria, and Kuwait. These were either harshly suppressed or were allowed to engage in electoral politics in the post-1986 liberalization phase. Some of those who were brutally suppressed joined forces with triumphant Islamist jihadists in Afghanistan and launched the second wave of Islamism, which took a violent form, including terror tactics of the kind favored by bin Laden, in the 1980s and early 1990s in Algeria, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other places. Initially, these groups primarily targeted Arab regimes (not Israel or the United States), especially—as in Algeria and Egypt—following failed attempts at political inclusion and participation. Islamists in that period were largely split between two very different groups: a small number of cultlike militant Salafists who used terror tactics against Arab regimes and Western targets, and much larger populist Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood that enjoyed widespread grass-roots support but were unable to gain power in the formal institutions of governance.

The third wave of Islamism consists of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hizbullah, the Islamic Action Front, and the Justice and Development Party, which are currently winning local or national power through democratic elections. They should be called religio-nationalists, because they combine the forces of religion and nationalism. (In Turkey, the mildly Islamist Justice and Development Party is in power and draws on popular support for state secularism and entry into the European Union, suggesting that politics and national interest, rather than theology, are the main driving forces of increasingly pragmatic Islamist parties). Arab Islamists use a combination of religion and nationalism efficiently, by crafting a message of hope, defiance, and self-assertive confidence that responds directly to the multiple complaints of their fellow citizens. Huge numbers of ordinary Arabs feel they have long been denied their cultural identity, political rights, national sovereignty, personal freedoms, and basic human dignity. Islamist groups have responded with a powerful package that speaks to their fellow citizens about religion, national identity, legitimate good governance, and resistance to foreign occupation and subjugation.

Islamist parties have generally increased their popular support and political profile in the past 15 years or so, though in recent years they seem to have reached the limits of the political power they can attain. The regimes in Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco, for example, have taken measures since 2005 to limit the role of Islamist parties, either by changing constitutional electoral rules or redistricting parliamentary constituencies. Some Islamist parties have also performed poorly while in parliament, causing them to lose appeal for some voters. The Israeli-American-European boycott of the victorious Hamas party in Palestine in 2007 was another setback to Islamist politics, as some citizens decided it is futile to pursue democratic politics in today's anti-Islamist environment.

Should peaceful mainstream political Islamism be killed and buried by a combination of Israeli-Western sanctions and Arab regimes' opposition, the subsequent

political landscape in the Arab world could very well see a coming together of five powerful forces that until now have generally had been kept separate: Sunni Islamic religious militancy, Arab national sentiment, anti-occupation military resistance, Iranian-Persian nationalism, and regional Shiite empowerment among Arabs and Iranians. In fact, this convergence manifested itself for the first time in 2006–2007, as Iran, Syria, Hizbullah, Hamas, and other smaller movements in the region formed an informal coalition to challenge the United States, Israel, and some Arab governments.

## **TWO CASE STUDIES: HIZBULLAH AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD**

### **Hizbullah in Lebanon**

Hizbullah is an example of a successful Islamist movement that touches on all the sentiments and political forces that swirl throughout the Middle East. A significant aspect of Hizbullah's role in Lebanon and the region is precisely that it is not one-dimensional or static. Hizbullah has played a half dozen important roles in its history; these roles keep evolving, as some disappear to be replaced by others. Its policies, services, and rhetoric blend religion, resistance, politics, alliance making, nationalism, and transnationalism. It is one of several Islamist political groups throughout the Middle East that have played a significant role in resisting foreign occupation or domestic autocrats but now serve mainly as representatives of national constituencies in governance systems based on democratic elections. Throughout its short life of a quarter century, Hizbullah's credibility and power have rested on five broad pillars:

- Delivering basic social welfare needs mainly to Shiite communities in different parts of Lebanon
- Resisting and ending the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon
- Being part of an (often Iranian-inspired) pan-Islamic movement that challenges American hegemonic aims in the region
- Providing efficient, noncorrupt governance at the local level
- Emerging as the main representative and protector of Shiite communal interests within Lebanon's explicitly sectarian and confessional political system

Until 2005, Hizbullah also benefited from close ties to the Syrians, who had dominated Lebanon for 29 years. Since 2006, however, Hizbullah's stands have been changing. The Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, Iran's increasing diplomatic tensions and simultaneous negotiations with the West, the Israeli departure from South Lebanon in 2000, and recent international pressures through UN Security Council resolutions have forced Hizbullah to review and redefine its national role in Lebanon. This partly reflects the increased local and global talk, after Israel's retreat from the south and the 2006 summer war, about the need to end Hizbullah's

status as an armed resistance group operating beyond the control of the Lebanese national armed forces. This move is required by both the UN resolutions and the Taif Agreement, which ended the Lebanese civil war in 1990.

Hizbullah seems to recognize that it must continue the transition it has been making in recent years—from primarily an armed resistance group against Israeli occupation and a service delivery body operating in the south to a national political organization, sitting in parliament and the cabinet and operating on a national political stage. It is unrealistic to deal with Hizbullah as only an armed resistance force, a political adjunct of Iran, a friend of Syria, the main interlocutor for Shias in Lebanese politics and power sharing, a growing force in parliament, or an Islamist voice of global anti-imperialism. It is all these things simultaneously, and always has been. At the same time, though, it continues to evolve in response to the changing needs of its constituents and the evolving political and geostrategic environment in which it operates. For example, its initial stress on promoting an Islamic society in Lebanon has been put on the back burner in recent years, in acknowledgment of the need to bring about any ideological change in the country through consensus among all the sectarian groups represented in the government.

Having achieved two of its primary aims in the period 1982–2000—asserting Shi-ite rights and power within the Lebanese political system and forcing Israel to withdraw from south Lebanon—Hizbullah is now facing the complex challenge of contesting power in an environment in which it meets significant political resistance. Its challenge to the Siniora government in Lebanon in the fall of 2006 was met by a strong response by the American- and Saudi-supported government, including counterdemonstrations to mirror Hizbullah's own show of force in the streets. An effective stalemate was quickly reached, with both sides seeming to enjoy equal popular strength inside Lebanon and equal foreign support. Hizbullah forged a daring political alliance with the leading Christian party headed by former General Michel Aoun, in an attempt to create an ideological front that transcends purely sectarian interests. This alliance seeks one-third of the cabinet seats, which would give it effective veto power over major policy moves; this power is necessary to ensure that the Lebanese government does not try to disarm Hizbullah, as the UN resolutions demand. This is a new battlefield for Hizbullah, in which its military prowess against Israel is not a major asset. It is learning that its political challenge to the government demands new tools and tactics, which it is acquiring by a process of trial and error. Some of its aggressive domestic moves, such as establishing a protest tent city in downtown Beirut that blocked the city center, have elicited strong protests from many Lebanese; the increasingly vocal public criticisms of its tactics and aims would have been unheard of three or four years earlier. As Hizbullah adjusts to the new political realities of its world, it will inevitably emphasize some of its many assets and downplay others. Recent events have clarified that it has a wide range of assets to draw on.

## Hizbullah in the World

The war between Hizbullah and Israel in the summer of 2006, in part a proxy battle between the United States and Iran, revealed that Hizbullah taps into and mirrors political sentiments across the Middle East that are very much wider and deeper than its successful quest to repel Israel's occupation of south Lebanon. Opinion polls in 2006–2007 indicate that Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah was the most admired leader throughout the Arab world. Hizbullah's deep popular support throughout the region reflects its ability to tap into a wide range of political sentiments and views that are also noteworthy for three particular reasons: they reflect a very diverse range of issues that appeal to public opinion; these issues bring together groups and countries that have rarely worked together before; and, collectively, these forces represent a significant new posture of resistance and defiance of the United States and Israel that continues to shape politics and diplomacy in the region.

Hizbullah generated wide support across the Middle East during the 2006 summer war because it appealed to various constituencies through the following political sentiments and movements:

- Lebanese patriotism, supporting both the liberation of Lebanon from Israeli occupation and the desire to keep it free from Western domination
- Arab nationalism, whose themes and rhetorical symbols are increasingly evident in the speeches of Hassan Nasrallah
- The Islamist political resurgence throughout the Middle East, evident in mostly Sunni-dominated movements such as Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Turkish Justice and Development Party
- Shiite empowerment, a process that has been underway since the mid-1970s in Lebanon and other parts of the region
- Provision of social and other services at the family, neighborhood, and community levels throughout Lebanon, but primarily in Shiite-majority regions
- Solidarity with the Palestinians, whose cause continues to resonate widely and passionately among peoples throughout the Middle East
- Strategic and tactical alliances with Iran, which aims to be the regional if not the global leader of anti-American defiance
- Close working ties with Syria, whose hard-line Baathist secular regime is among the last of the Soviet-style centralized Arab security states that defy the United States
- Resistance to foreign occupation of Arab lands, whether the Anglo-American armies in Iraq or the Israeli army in Lebanon
- Promotion of good governance at the local and national levels in Arab countries, to replace the corrupt, inefficient, and often incompetent regimes that have ruled in recent decades
- Defiance of what Hizbullah and others call American-dominated Western imperial aims and hegemonic designs aimed at transforming the Middle East

into a region of compliant governments that fall in line with American-Israeli strategic aims. Specifically, Hizbullah's domestic political challenge to the Siniora-led Lebanese government since December 2006 has revolved around the main accusation that the government is an American puppet.

Never before in modern Arab history have such different, and often antagonistic, sentiments and views come together in a single movement, or at least a temporary tactical alliance of convenience. The parties that converge in supporting Hizbullah also notably transcend many of the fault lines that had long been thought to define the contemporary Middle East: Shias and Sunnis, Arabs and Iranians, Islamists and Baathists, and secular and religious groups all seem to work together comfortably these days, brought together by their common desire to resist Israel, the United States, and some pro-Western Arab regimes.

It is unclear if this convergence, or even coalition, of forces represents only a fleeting surge of emotions or a historic shift of political direction in the Middle East toward a new regional Cold War, in which Arabs, Iranians, Islamists, nationalists, and state patriots join forces to confront the Israeli-American side, with its handful of Arab supporters. The only certainty for now is that Hizbullah taps into a combination of very diverse political, personal, ideological, national, religious, social, and other sentiments that millions of Arabs embrace in their continuing but elusive quest for stable, satisfying statehood and meaningful sovereignty.

### **The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan**

Like Hizbullah, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood is a mainstream, populist, and broadly successful political-social-religious movement that combines several different dimensions of identity in the modern Arab world. Unlike Hizbullah, it operates in an environment in which it must interact with a strong central state. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood was established in 1942 as a branch of the Egyptian group. Its ceremonial office opening was held under the patronage of Jordan's King Abdullah I—an indication of the consistently close relationship between the Brotherhood and the Hashemite monarchy.

When all other ideological organizations and political parties were banned in Jordan, the Brotherhood for decades was a licensed social and charitable organization that was allowed to open offices throughout the kingdom. It used its schools, clinics, youth centers, and religious instruction and charitable efforts to spread its conservative Islamic social message throughout society. The monarchy allowed it to operate because it was an effective counterforce to the Nasserite, Arab nationalist, communist, socialist, and Baathist leftist ideologies that swirled around the Middle East beginning in the 1950s. Relations with the regime fluctuated, however, in line with the political events of the day. When Jordan moved closer to the United States and Israel or worked against fellow Muslim Brothers in adjacent Syria, relations became tense. Domestic issues that the Brotherhood has routinely championed,

usually against state positions, include economic adjustment and liberalization policies, “normalization” with Israel (after the 1994 peace treaty), greater domestic freedoms, and revised election laws that do not restrict opposition groups.

The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood juggles a series of different identities and ideologies that often appear to contradict one another, yet it continues to be a credible and popular force in society—if not very effective in winning power or changing state policies. Its conservative Islamist, pan-Arab, and anti-Israeli orientation would appear to run counter to the Jordanian monarchy’s prevailing pro-Western, peace-with-Israel policies, which include a commitment to free market economics and a liberal social agenda that is open to Western cultural influences. The Brotherhood definitely works within a Jordanian-Hashemite framework, while ostensibly promoting transnational Islamist principles that transcend the confines of a single state. Since its inception, the movement has also delicately balanced its heavily Palestinian-Jordanian grass-roots support with its mostly trans-Jordanian leadership—though it seems to increasingly reflect the concerns of Palestinian-Jordanians in refugee camps and densely populated, low-income urban areas of Amman and Zarqa.

The Brotherhood continues to exhibit some confusion—at least inconsistency—about whether it wants to join or challenge the Jordanian political power structure and about whether it is primarily a movement to promote Islamic values in society or one to help define state political policies by joining the government and parliament. In recent years, it has leaned toward playing by the rules, even when it charges that the rules are rigged against it and other opposition groups. Brotherhood members have been consistently included in monarchy-managed institutions, such as the cabinet, the appointed senate, the recent national reform agenda committees, and the National Consultative Council, which replaced the suspended parliament in the 1970s and 1980s. When parliamentary elections were resumed, with by-elections in 1984 and a full election for the lower house of parliament in 1989, the Brotherhood did very well. It took three of the six seats it contested in 1984, and it captured 22 of the house’s 80 seats in 1989. That number declined to 16 seats in 1993. During those years, the Brotherhood was still operating as a social and charitable organization, and its candidates technically ran as independents. At one point, it held the speakership of the house and had five members in the cabinet, including the ministries of education and social development, sensitive positions from which it could spread its influence among youth.

The Brotherhood boycotted the 1997 elections, accusing the government of rigging the votes against it, though in that year it also formed its first legal political party in Jordan, the Islamic Action Front (IAF). In 2003, the IAF returned to electoral life and took 17 of the 110 seats in parliament. In the most recent election in 2007, it won just 7 seats. Its relative decline has been due to two main reasons: government manipulation of electoral districts to restrict the Brotherhood’s seats

in parliament, and some voter dissatisfaction with the party's performance. It has been accused of concentrating on tangential issues—mixed sports classes for elementary school children or men allowed in jobs as women's hairdressers—instead of using its role in the parliament and cabinet to affect more resonant political and economic matters. One of the issues it championed in the 1970s before any other politicians dared to speak out was corruption among government officials—but it has proved totally ineffective in holding accountable any accused officials other than minor miscreants. Its relative drop in public standing and decreased participation in parliament partly reflect its inability to translate lofty rhetoric and courageous political challenges into practical policies that respond to citizens' real needs and concerns.

The IAF itself charges that its lost ground in parliament is mainly due to the government's blatant gerrymandering of electoral districts and the state's and other candidates' ballot stuffing to favor pro-government candidates. Its relations with the government and the state remain erratic. For example, it withdrew from the 2007 municipal elections, claiming the government manipulated the votes of armed forces members, though some of its members who ran won seats and two mayorships.

In line with the polarization that occurs throughout Arab politics, the Brotherhood has nurtured a more radical wing alongside its moderate majority, with some members moving closer to Hamas in Palestine and a few openly praising the actions of anti-American militants in Iraq, including the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, himself a Jordanian national. The Jordanian government's concern that the Brotherhood offers dangerous openings for Iran, Hamas, and Hizbullah to penetrate Jordanian politics is one reason for recent state moves to contain the party's growth and power. However, the Brotherhood, working through the IAF, remains the permissible and preferred public face of political Islam in the eyes of the Jordanian monarchy. The monarchy also has allowed the IAF to contest power in the hope that this would curtail the tendency of more radical members of the Brotherhood to gravitate toward smaller, more militant organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or Al-Qaeda-affiliated movements.

Six and a half decades after its formation in Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood continues to evolve in terms of the identities it reflects, the constituency it caters to, and its relations with the Hashemite monarchy and the Jordanian state. It remains a bedrock of regime legitimacy and stability, siding with the monarchy in times of existential threat (such as the internal Jordanian-PLO clashes in 1970). Yet it also rallies support against the policies of incumbent governments—carefully avoiding criticism of the monarch—in areas such as foreign and economic policy and domestic political rights and freedoms. It is at once, and at different moments, monarchist, trans-Jordanian, pro-Palestinian, pan-Arab, anti-Israeli, anti-Western, and pan-Islamist. This multifaceted character partly reflects

the political and demographic environment in which it operates, where loyalty and acquiescence to the state and the monarchy are the entry price for participation in the political system. Its strong, consistent expression of Islamic values and its occasional challenges to government corruption or pro-Western policies maintain for it a core of popular support that usually hovers around 20 percent, according to public opinion polls. Its internal splits, the Jordanian-Palestinian tensions, its reliance on state authorization for its operations, and the imprecision with which it defines its own role as a religious or political force have weakened its impact in society.

## CONCLUSION

The Arab world is a juxtaposition of many ideologies, identities, and governance systems. It is necessary to acknowledge and understand these phenomena both separately and as they interact. No one analytical framework is appropriate for encapsulating the dynamic interplay of forces within the region. Rather, a multi-level analysis that encompasses the wide range of identities and ideologies, from personal and tribal identity to concepts of statehood and nationhood, should be used. It is equally important to take into account the fact that the Arab world is currently experiencing a flourishing public discourse about these very issues. The region is in the process of defining itself, and more actors than ever before have a voice in that turbulent process.

### Yemen's Sunni-Shiite Divide

The current Yemeni state was formed in May 1990 with the unification of the historically Shiite-ruled North and the majority Sunni South. The stronger North dominates politics, and Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, is Shiite. Sunnis have always been excluded from positions of power in the North, and after unification the Sunnis in the South met with a similar fate.

One of the greatest sectarian challenges that Yemen currently faces, however, does not come from the Sunni-Shiite geographical and political divide but rather from a minority extremist Shiite group. Al-Shabab al-Moumin (the Youthful Believers), operating in Saada governorate on the Yemeni-Saudi border, has become a thorn in the side of the government and a concern to Yemen's neighbors and the international community. The insurgency, commonly called al-Houthi after its founder, Hussein al-Houthi, rejects the current government as illegitimate because it is not run by a Shiite *sayyid*, a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, and demands the restoration of the *sayyid*-led imamate that previously ruled the North for over a thousand years. The movement also denounces the government's ties with the United States and demands an end to social and political reforms.

The conflict has raged intermittently for the last three years, and the government's violent suppression of the movement has caused growing dissent amid claims that it is suppressing its Shiite minority (this despite the fact that it is also accused of discriminating against Sunnis). The government has responded by restricting journalist access to the Saada province, effectively creating a media blackout. Even so, it is estimated that 300 government soldiers and al-Houthis had been killed as of December 2007. There are also severe food shortages due to the displacement of nearly 80,000 civilian residents.

While the form of Shiism practiced by al-Houthi's followers is distinct from that in Iran, Yemen and the other Gulf nations are increasingly worried by Iran's interest in the conflict. The Yemeni government has indirectly accused Iran and Libya of financially supporting al-Houthi. In May 2007, Yemen recalled its ambassadors from Tehran and Tripoli for consultations, but it has not yet taken the step of cutting diplomatic relations. Iran denies accusations of involvement, and al-Houthi leaders maintain that the Yemeni government is playing off regional fears of an increasing Iranian influence.

*Sources:* US Department of State; *International Religious Freedom Report 2007*; *World Press*; The Middle East Research and Information Project.